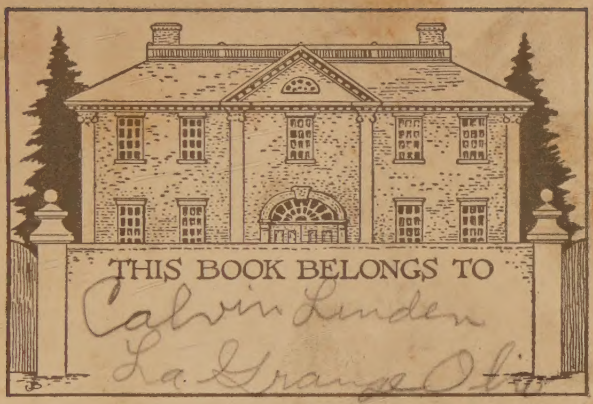
THE TRAIL RIDER

George W. Ogden


THIS BOOK BELONGS TO
Calvin Linden
La Grange Ohio

THE TRAIL RIDER

THE TRAIL RIDER

A ROMANCE OF THE KANSAS RANGE

BY

GEORGE W. OGDEN

AUTHOR OF

THE LAND OF LAST CHANCE,
CLAIM NUMBER ONE,
THE TRAIL'S END, ETC.

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN FROM TEXAS

ALL that Boley Drumgoole had gathered in his long grazing across the range of life was an armful of old white whiskers. They were not much to behold, small adornment to wear; for they were beginning to turn yellow, like a weathered marble tombstone, or wool that has a rust in it, or old, dusty whiskers, indeed, that have strained tobacco smoke for more than fifty years.

"Uncle Boley," he was called, and he was not troubled at all over the things which he had missed in this world while his talents were being bent to the production of that beard, the biggest ever seen between the Missouri and the Cimarron. It was his mantle and his comforter; it would be his shroud. He buttoned it under his vest to keep the pleurisy out of his chest when the wind stood northeast and the wintry days were gray, turning it out with the first warm sun of March, like a crocus, vain of its endeavor to make a dun world bright.

Uncle Boley had been an unwilling widower for

upward of eighteen years, a circumstance that vexed him and hurt his pride. He deplored the immorality of a society in which women laughed at long, white whiskers, and swore in the same breath that if matrimony demanded the sacrifice of them he would march on to the grave a single man. No woman in the world was worth it.

While he waited in hope for the reformation of society, Uncle Boley supplemented his pension by the manufacture of boots for the cowboys and cattlemen, who were thick on the Arkansas Valley range of Kansas in those early days. His shop was no larger than the front room of his little house in Cottonwood, and that was not much bigger than a bedstead; his only machinery the primitive tools of the bench-worker at his trade.

He had followed the frontier from Westport, on the Missouri line, where he began in the old freighting days, and had brought up in Cottonwood for his last stand. His fame as a contriver of high heels and quilted tops reached as far as New Mexico, borne up and down the cattle world by the far-riding vaqueros, who held him in the first esteem.

In those days Cottonwood was not so much of a town as in time it grew to be, for it was only the beginning, indefinite and broad-sown on the treeless prairie beside the sandy stream. There had

been a tree on the site of the town at one time, remembered for the hangings which had been carried to perfection by the assistance of its friendly boughs. From that tree, no trace of which now remained, the town had taken its name, and it was a new and altogether unlovely place, bleak alike under summer sun and winter storm.

Sod houses with sere grass standing on their roofs, as it had begun to grow with the spring rains and withered to sapless brown by the summer sun, stood in scattered irregularity, like a grazing herd, forming the outskirts of the town. Tin cans were sown thickly around them, but never vegetable nor flower sprung from the willing soil beside their walls.

In the business section the houses were arranged with more regularity, as if a future had been planned. Most of these buildings were of planks, with stubby fronts, appearing as if they had been slapped in the face and flattened for their threatened trespass upon the road.

There was no distinction in living in a sod house in Cottonwood, for anybody who could borrow a spade might have one. If a man was affluent or consequential in any degree, he bought lumber and built himself a more aristocratic abode. On this account there was a continual sawing and hammering going on in Cottonwood in those times, for

money poured into the place from the great herds on the rich prairie lands around.

The town had been built on cattle, and on cattle its hope of future greatness rested. The railroad had reached out to it across the sea of prairie like the needle of a compass to its pole, and was building on into the West to open new worlds for canned goods to overcome. Out of Cottonwood supplies went into this new country, and into Cottonwood the wild-eyed herds were driven for shipment, all combining to make it a busy place. No restriction had been put on the traffic in alcoholic liquor at that time in that part of the country, and in Cottonwood there was a good deal of lurid life, a right smart of shooting and slashing around. Uncle Boley Drumgoole had seven pairs of boots, standing on the little shelf at his back, which had been ordered and paid for by men who did not live to enjoy them.

So it was in this atmosphere, if you can sense it hurriedly from the little sniff that has been given to you here, that Uncle Boley was sewing a bootleg on a calm autumn morning, his beard tucked out of the way under his left suspender. He was thinking on marriage and taking in marriage, as he usually occupied his thoughts when alone, and of the correspondence that he had struck up with a lively widow in Topeka, when the frame of a man dark-

ened in the door between him and the bright, glaring day. Uncle Boley looked up from his seam, sighing as he relinquished the sweet thoughts of the distant widow whom he had never seen, nodded to the man, who had paused in his door as if for permission to enter, worked his chin rapidly in short chops to dislodge the chew of tobacco between his jawbone and his cheek. This operation gave an aspect of menace to the venerable bootmaker's otherwise placid face, which a stranger was very likely to interpret as a prelude to a volley of invective, in keeping with the customs of Cottonwood and the wild men who rode that untrammeled land.

"Come in," said Uncle Boley, a little thickly on account of the waxed-end that he held in his mouth. The man stretched out his arm and, with palm against the jamb of the door, stood as one does when he has been on his feet a long time, shifting his weight from leg to leg, and grinned dustily at Uncle Boley.

Telling about it afterward, when there was reason for it and distinction in it, Uncle Boley always said that grin reminded him of the way a strange dog stops to wag its tail and looks up at you. There was something half-timid, wholly uncertain, in the unspoken salutation, yet an appeal of friendliness that made a man want to shake

hands with him and push him out a cheer. That's the way Uncle Boley always told it; he had felt just like he wanted to shake hands with him and push him out a cheer.

"I wonder if I could get a shoe fixed here?" the stranger asked.

Uncle Boley looked him over before replying, the waxed-end hanging down his beard. He saw that the young fellow was tall and lanky, with steady, dark eyes which had a sparkle of humor in them, and dark hair that looked as if it needed cutting so badly that it must give him pain. But, Uncle Boley concluded in the same breath, they'd have to rope and hobble that chap to do it, more than likely, he looked so skittish and shy. He seemed a grave man for his years, which the bootmaker estimated at twenty-five or thirty, long-jointed, big-nosed, big-handed. Uncle Boley looked at his feet; they were made to carry a man.

"Shoe," said Uncle Boley, with plain disparagement of that sort of footgear. "Nobody but the women and kids around here wears shoes."

"I'm a stranger; I'll get into the customs of the country when I learn them."

"Yes, you likely will. Now, if you want a good pair of boots, dog cheap"—Uncle Boley turned to the shelf behind his bench and took down a pair that he estimated might fit—"I can fix you up."

"I'd like to have a pair, but I haven't got the money to buy them."

Uncle Boley put them back without a word, an expression of loftiness coming over his hairy face.

"Well, I don't reckon I can fix your shoe. I ain't got time to fool with shoes."

Uncle Boley took his dangling threads and gave them the three little jerks which he always employed in tightening a stitch. "Where you from?"

"Topeka, and—Topeka, sir."

"Topeky?" Uncle Boley looked up with the word, a gleam of eagerness in his sharp, blue eyes. "Topeky, heh? Let me see that there shoe."

It had cast a heel, as a horse throws a shoe, and the stranger had it in his pocket. Uncle Boley said it was useless, for it was worn down to nothing but the shadow of a heel. He demanded to see the other one, and found it just as bad. He bent over his work again a little while, as if the case of the heels was beyond salvation and he had put it out of his mind.

"Take 'em off," said he, sewing away, not lifting an eye. "I'll fix 'em for you."

But the young man hesitated. He was concerned about the cost.

"Well, it won't make me and it won't break you," said Uncle Boley, with the largeness of a man to whom trifles are annoying.

"I'm not so sure about the last part of it, sir."

"Well, if you're that nigh busted, you can stand me off till you git a job. I never took the last cent out of a man's pocket in my life."

"It must be a comfortable reflection at your age, sir."

"Well, I ain't as old as some," said Uncle Boley tartly, "and I'm a danged sight better man 'n many a one not half my age!"

"I didn't mean to imply that you had reached your dotage, sir." The stranger's grave, sensitive face reddened at the old man's heat. The flush appeared to increase his homeliness. For he was undoubtedly homely, but with a good plainness, Uncle Boley thought, like a man who would be kind to a horse or a woman.

"I'm as good as any man of forty-seven you can find in this country!"

Uncle Boley jerked his threads a bit sharply as he spoke, watching the stranger's face with sly, upward glancing of his wise old eyes which belied his apparent ill temper.

"Yes, and most of them at forty, I'll bet you a purty, sir."

There was a softness in the stranger's speech, a drawl in his words, that had marked him from the moment that he opened his mouth as somewhere

from the South, primarily, even though Topeka just now. Uncle Boley nodded.

"From Texas, I 'low?"

"Yes, sir; I was bornd and raised in Taixas."

"What might they call you where you come from, son?"

"Why, they *call* me Taixas, sir—Taixas Hartwell, James or Jim christened, if you prefer it, sir."

"Texas suits me all right. Them two names goes together handy, too—easy to say—Texas Hartwell. Jimses and James is too thick already in this man's country; yes, and jim-jamses, too."

"Yes, sir."

Uncle Boley worked at the seam until he had used up the thread in the leather, then took the extra waxed-end out of his mouth and put the boot aside. He took up one of the crippled shoes, turned it, examined it, as if he had come across some curiosity in the shoemaker's art.

"You must 'a' done a sight of walkin' in them shoes."

"I have walked a right smart little stretch in 'em, sir."

"I don't reckon all the way from Topeky?"

"Not all the way, sir."

Uncle Boley hammered at the new lift of heel that he was laying on, brads in his mouth, a smudge

of neat's foot oil on his bald head. The stranger sat reading a bill that hung on the wall at the ancient bootmaker's back.

This poster was an advertisement of an event that was going forward in Cottonwood that very day—a three days' fair celebrating the annual convention of the Cattle Raisers' Association. It was a modest announcement, in small type, but it seemed to draw the stranger into it as if it held matter of the first importance.

"Don't reckon you know anybody name of Gertie Moorehead up there in Topeky, do you?"

Uncle Boley spoke in casual manner, as if he might be inquiring after a distant relative, or somebody who owed him money that he never expected to collect. He pretended to be altogether centered in fitting another lift on the heel, keeping his eyes on it, making a little hissing noise through his teeth.

The young man started, reddened, took his eyes off the advertisement of the fair, as if he had been caught stealing leather.

"Who, sir?"

"Lady name of Gertie Moorehead," Uncle Boley repeated, still too busy to lift his eyes.

"No, sir; I can't say that I do, sir. I'm not very largely acquainted in that city, scarcely acquainted at all, sir."

"Oh, I reckon you just passed through," said

Uncle Boley, plainly disappointed. He was, in a measure, indignant, too, having been taken in that way by the expectation, the hope, that this stranger raised in his breast. He had been all of a tremble in his eagerness to hear a first-hand description of the lady whose photograph was in the drawer right there in the shop that moment, and to learn whether her representation of property, real and personal, was true, or colored for matrimonial purposes. He had been drawn into mending a pair of shoes, and for a man who had no money, on that hope. But instead of being a resident of Topeka, this man had only passed through—tramped through, Uncle Boley was ready to bet money—and didn't know Gertie from Gilderoy's goose.

Uncle Boley knocked away at the heel with vindictive blows, his whiskers working from the anchorage of his suspender in his vehemence. He stopped to tuck them back again and roll his eyes sourly at Texas Hartwell, who sat there with his gaze glued on the bill advertising the fair as if he had discovered the rarest piece of literature on the globe.

"What kind of a job 're you lookin' for?"

Another jump away from the poster, another swift flame of blood in the bleak and bony face of Texas Hartwell.

"Sir?"

"I said what kind of a job 're you lookin' for, if you're lookin' for any?"

" 'Most any kind."

"Can you tend bar?"

"Well, I never did, sir."

"Maybe you can deal faro?"

"I'm afraid I'd fail to give satisfaction at it, sir."

"Huh!" said Uncle Boley, in the manner of a man who had so little faith that it almost amounted to contempt. Presently he brightened a bit and looked up hopefully.

"Can you cook or carpenter?"

Texas smiled, a smile that illuminated his face like a light within. He shook his head slowly, fighting the smile back to the corners of his mouth, the corners of his dark eyes.

"No, sir. I wouldn't be a bit of good at either of them."

"Huh!" said Uncle Boley, with a little more stress on it than before.

He returned to his work with the air of a man who knew himself to be in for a bad job, and determined to have it off his hands as soon as possible. Uncle Boley had canvassed the list of possibilities in Cottonwood for a man who wore shoes. Outside of the arts and crafts named nobody went around in shoes; and if a man who wore them could

neither deal, tend bar, cook, nor carpenter, there was no place for him in the activities of the town. Even the lawyers and doctors wore boots like regular men.

"I was thinkin' I might get something to do around the cattle ranches, sir."

"Huh! Did you ever see a horse?"

"Yes, sir; I've seen 'em, sir."

"Well, was you ever *on* one?"

"I've had some little *ex*-perience around 'em, sir."

"In a livery barn, I reckon." Uncle Boley was at no pains to conceal his contempt.

"I was raised up on a cattle ranch, sir," Texas said gravely, rather loftily, "and I can ride a horse and throw a rope with any man between Taixas and Montana, sir. If it's the shoes—"

"Well, it *was* the shoes!" Uncle Boley smote the one on his knee a disdainful blow. "No man that ever rode after cattle ain't got no right to lower hisself down to shoes!"

"A man can't always choose what he'll put on his feet, sir, any more than he can select the road they're to follow."

Uncle Boley sat a little while, his eyes on the unfinished heel. When he spoke it was with a new note of respect, a gentleness and softness more becoming to the wisdom of his years.

"You're right; you're mighty right. A man can *be* a man and wear shoes, but"—forcefully—"he ort to git out of 'em as quick as he can!"

"I was just a readin' on that bill, sir, that they're goin' to have a ropin' contest for *both* men and ladies at the fair here this afternoon. I never heard of ladies bein' admitted to that rough sport before."

"This is the first time they've ever had 'em mixed up in it here. Ain't a woman's place to go straddlin' around on a horse ropin' and hog-tyin' steers. I had a wife or daughter tried it, I'd turn her over m' knee, that's what I'd do!"

"They're not to compete against the men, sir, it says."

"Don't make no difference; they ain't got no business competin' around at all. Well, I *will* make one exception—but I grudge that one."

"Is there any entrance fee for contestants, or do you know?"

"It's as free as air. Anybody that's got a horse and a rope— Why don't you try it, if you're a roper?"

"I've been sittin' here tryin' to study up some plan to do it. The bill says first prize for men is two hundred and fifty dollars. Do you reckon they mean it?"

"Well, I wouldn't advise you to go down there to the fair grounds and ask 'em that!"

"I was just thinkin' that if I had a horse I might try my hand."

Uncle Boley looked him over again, this time more carefully than at the first inventory.

Except for the shoes, he wasn't materially different from the general run of cowboys. He had the slender, pliant waist and lean hams of the saddleman; and long, strong arms, which looked as if they could swing and throw a lariat. Indeed, he wore the conventional hat of a cowboy, and the gray laced flannel shirt. His trousers seemed to be a little odd, but that was, perhaps, on account of no boots. Boots to the knees make a great difference in a man's legs, as Uncle Boley knew.

"What kind of a job did you work at last?"

"I never had a job in my life, sir."

"I thought you said you was raised on a ranch?"

Uncle Boley looked at him sharply.

"My father's ranch."

Uncle Boley seemed to take a new and deep interest in his work. He pegged away for fully ten minutes with never a word, and scarcely a look in the direction of his doubtful customer. By pressure of habit he had taken up the waxed-end and put it in his mouth, and when he spoke, at length,

he mumbled around it, as if he communed to himself.

"I guess every man knows why he left and where he's bound for. I know I left Mezoury one time 'cause I killed a feller's dog. Yes, sir, that dang man was goin' to shoot me."

"I never killed anybody's dog in my life," said Texas.

He was looking out into the street, but with that in his eyes eyes which told the old man his thoughts were far away from the scene before him. People were passing, afoot and on horse, and the dust of their coming and going was blowing lazily on the soft, autumn wind; but Texas could not have told whether they were men or cattle, and Uncle Boley would have bet a handful of tacks on that.

"A man don't have to kill a *dog,*" the old man suggested.

"Sir?" said Texas, with that peculiar start, that unaccountable mounting of color, to his brown, tough face.

"I said a man might run off with some other feller's wife," said Uncle Boley, very sarcastically, speaking loudly, as if to a deaf person.

"He might," Texas allowed, his all-transforming smile moving the corners of his eyes again, "but I assure you, sir, I never did."

Uncle Boley looked at him comically a moment,

bent over his work, and laughed, his old high-keyed, dry-leather laugh. It was no small triumph, if Texas had known it, to pull a laugh out of cynical old Uncle Boley. He didn't say a word more until he had the last tack driven, the newness of the repaired heels duly disguised by blacking, after the ancient custom of his craft. Then he handed the shoes over to their owner, shook his head, took the waxed-end out of his mouth.

"No, I'll bet a button you never did!" said he, and laughed again, with such deep gusto it made him cough.

Texas put on his shoes, stood to try them, stamped this foot and that, thrust his hand into his pocket, and inquired how much it was.

"Dollar," said Uncle Boley, turning his head as if ashamed of mentioning such a trifle.

Texas produced it, but Uncle Boley pretended to be absorbed in something transpiring in the street. Texas put it on the bench before him, apology in his movement, and started for the door.

"How much does that leave you?" Uncle Boley asked.

"Sufficient for immediate needs, sir, thank you."

"Yes, and I'll bet you couldn't match it if your neck depended on it!"

Which was true, and Uncle Boley knew it was

true by the signs that came into the lanky Texan's face.

"Here"—handing out the dollar—"I said I'd trust you till you struck a job. You take this money, and go and spend it over there at the Buffalo Waller café for something that 'll stick to your ribs, and when you've done that, come back here and we'll see about a horse for that there ropin' doin's this afternoon."

"If you could help me to a horse, sir!" said Texas, brightening so wonderfully that he seemed like another man.

"Well, maybe I can."

"And if I win the purse—"

"Wouldn't be surprised if you did."

"I'll split it with you, sir!"

"Yes, an' you won't do no such a dam' thing! Go on over there and put something under your shirt to work on. It takes beefsteak and taters to give a man the stren'th to throw a steer."

CHAPTER II

A FEMALE CENTAUR

UNCLE BOLEY was the proudest man on the fair grounds that afternoon when Texas came over from the office with the money in his hand. The old man was in the very first row of the grand stand, his whiskers combed out to their mightiest, his face glowing like a Santa Claus mask.

"It was as purty a piece of ropin' as I ever seen, Texas," he declared, going forward to meet the young man, as proud of the admiration in the ladies' eyes, the complimentary comment of cowmen and cowboys around him, as if the stranger were his son.

"It wasn't such a scan'lous hard piece of work with that horse of yours, sir. He's the finest cowpony I ever threw a leg over, sir, and the smartest."

The old man's eyes softened with a mist of tenderness at this praise.

"I raised that horse from a colt, but I didn't teach him them tricks, Texas. It was a girl that broke him in to handle cattle."

"Why, sir, you don't tell me!"

Texas looked at Uncle Boley with amazement in his face. Animated by his success he seemed younger and livelier by many years than when he had stood in the shop-door a few hours before, dusty and roadworn, hungry and downhearted.

"You'll see her purty soon—she's in this here ladies' contest that's comin' next. Well, if there's any excuse for any girl in Kansas bein' in it, that girl's Sallie McCoy. I *would* take down the bars for Sallie, for she's a lady, no matter what she does."

"I'm sure she is, sir; the actions of that little horse tell me as much."

"She'll ride him when she goes in. You'll have a chance to see his work."

"She'll ride *him?* Why, if I'd 'a' known it, sir—it wasn't fair of me to use him and tire him all out!"

"That's all right; he's able to stand it and never turn a hair."

"But if I'd 'a' known that you intended to let her ride him, I never would 'a' thrown a leg over him, sir."

"I ain't a lettin' her use him—it was her that lent him to us—she owns him."

Texas looked at him with fallen countenance most woeful to behold. Injured pride flushed his

cheeks, humiliation lurked in his eyes like the pain of a wound.

"But I understood you to say, sir—"

"That I raised him. I did; but I give him to Sallie five years ago. If you think runnin' down and ropin' one fool chuckleheaded steer's a goin' to wind that horse, then you've got another guess comin' to you, young feller."

"But I'm scan'lous sorry, just the same. I feel like I'd taken a mean advantage of a lady's generosity; I feel—just like—a whipped pup!"

Uncle Boley passed if off with a grunt, taking it all as a reflection on the endurance of the horse. He spread his big red handkerchief on the rough board seat for which he had paid two dollars, and nodded for Texas to compose himself beside him.

"Two dollars for a piece of board a foot and a half long!" he protested. "Might know it wasn't any bunch of cowmen that got this thing up. Keep a man pickin' splinters out of his britches for the next month!"

"Didn't the cowmen get it up, sir? I understood from the bill—"

"Yes, but it wasn't the association; the association didn't have nothing to do with the fair. They're holding the convention here, all right, but a crowd of Wichita men, and some of the light-

heels of this town, got up this show to rastle a few more dollars away from folks."

"Well, they sure have succeeded," said Texas, sweeping a quick look over the crowded grand stand.

Uncle Boley nodded, but did not look about him. Instead, he was surveying Texas, with every evidence of satisfaction in his glowing face. He had insisted on boots, and had found a pair among the unclaimed ones on his shelf that fitted Texas as if they had been measured for him. It made a great difference in the young man's legs, Uncle Boley reflected; it gave him the shape and proportions of a proper man.

"Yes, and there'll be a heap of money put up on Sallie McCoy," the old man said, twisting his head to express magnitude; "scads and piles of it. Every cowman and puncher in fifty miles is here to put his money on Sallie. Pore as I am, I rolled up a little and put it on her, and if I had more, I'd resk it too, by Ned!"

Texas jumped to his feet, seeing here an opening to express his gratitude.

"I'll put up a hundred apiece for us!"

"I don't encourage gamblin'," said the old man sagely; "but when I run into a bunch of light-heels that's achin' to git rid of their money, I'm bound to help 'em all I can. Put it up for yourself, if

you want to, but I ain't a goin' to split that money with you, and I told you that at the start."

Moved by his sense of obligation to this unknown Sallie McCoy, Texas went down to post a bet on her. From what the old man had said, he expected to find the odds largely in her favor, and was not a little surprised to learn that it was the other way. There was no lack of money at two to one against Sallie McCoy, and the friends and supporters of that young lady were covering it as fast as they could count.

On all sides he heard it expressed that somebody was in for a shearing. The fact that strangers should come from Wichita and bet against the local favorite was hotly resented. It was being said that they had offered odds to bring out the money, and the challenge was working very well.

Texas crossed over to where a crowd stood round a pen in which the steers were confined, hoping that he might get a glimpse of Sallie McCoy among the contestants, who were waiting on the other side of the big corral gate. There were three girls looking over the animals, which were soon to fall before their cunning hands, making wise comments on the points of strength and speed which the steers presented. They were range-roughened girls, browned by sun and wind, dressed in divided skirts, with more or less savage trinkery and ornamenta-

tion on their hats and belts. He did not believe that Sallie McCoy was among them.

These were the kind of girls whom the cowboys flung heels-high in their rough dances; strong-armed, broad-chested, afraid of neither man nor beast. He believed Sallie McCoy must be out of a more delicate mold than these.

One of the judges rode into the arena to announce the rules governing this contest, which were somewhat different from those under which the men had competed.

Each contestant was to enter the arena alone, after having selected the steer upon which she was to practise her art from the number in the pen. The animal was to be allowed a running start before the rope was thrown. No assistance would be given, except in the event that the contestant became entangled or otherwise imperiled. A man with a megaphone would announce before the grand stand each contestant's name as she entered, and the time it took her to throw and hog-tie the steer, when she had accomplished that feat.

The first girl was mounting her horse as Texas turned to go back to Uncle Boley; but at that moment one entered the enclosure where the contestants waited whose appearance rooted his feet to the ground. Texas drew himself up to his toes to look at her as she swept past the other girls, giving them

an indifferent, rather superior, glance as she passed.

She was dressed in green velvet bolero and divided skirt, with silver buttons down the outside seams of this wide, trouser-like garment. Her little spurs were silver, a silver ornament held back the brim of her broad hat, showing the engaging sweep of her abundant dark hair over her dainty ear. Her skin was of a tender whiteness, reddened on cheek and lip by nature's own cosmetics, in fine contrast with her brilliant habit and dark eyes. She was handsome, and so well aware of it that there was a certain haughtiness in her carriage, near neighbor to disdain.

Texas thought she was the most superb human being he ever had seen. He did not believe that it was possible that she could sit a saddle against the shock of a roped steer, or leap to the ground, while her horse strained on the taut lariat, and run with rope in hand and secure the thrown creature's wild-striving legs.

Could this ripe beauty, this voluptuous creature, be Sallie McCoy? Texas was all of a-quiver to find out. He saw that the officials of the fair paid her the utmost deference, fairly jumping in their eagerness to make a place for her as she set her dainty foot on the plank of the stock-pen and climbed up to get a better view of the arena.

He hurried back to ask Uncle Boley about her,

arriving before the grand stand to find that the passage leading into the arena had been blocked completely by late arrivals, chiefly women. He was too timid, too considerate, to disturb them. Uncle Boley saw him, and waved his hand understandingly.

Texas took up his station in front of the grand stand with the fringe of favored ones who had been allowed to penetrate that far, and one came past on a horse to warn them back close against the wall, and to caution them that they would have to look out for themselves when things began to pop between the ladies and the steers.

Texas watched the work of the first three girls keenly. Two of them were ordinary; one was excellent. But none of them was Sallie McCoy. But he had not expected one of them to turn out to be Sallie McCoy. Surely it was the girl in the velvet dress who was Sallie; and yet—there was something deeper in his heart that denied this; why, he could not tell. Perhaps it was because she was grander than he had pictured Uncle Boley's friend to be, and bolder, perhaps, if that word might be permitted in the description of a lady.

The grand stand was going wild over the last girl. She was the comeliest of the three whom he had seen in the corral, and he thought that if she

was not one of the "queens of the range" which the poster had announced, then she was a princess, at least. The spectators appeared to hold the same opinion. They would not be satisfied until she had ridden past, modest and blushing, her hair in disorder from her struggle with the steer, her hat in her hand. Sallie McCoy would have to go a pretty good pace to beat that girl's time, Texas thought, and began to fear for her reputation.

He looked again toward the stock-pen. There another girl had appeared on horse-back, and—there was no mistaking it—the very horse that he had ridden to a winning finish not more than an hour before. So that would be Sallie McCoy, beyond a doubt, and it was not the gorgeous lady in the velvet dress and silver spurs.

Anything, indeed, but gorgeous this little lady appeared as she rode into the arena and came to a stop not a rod from the spot where Texas stood. She was dressed plainly in a loose, shirtlike upper garment, laced at the front in the cowboy style, a modest blue necktie tucked into the bosom. Her gray blouse disappeared under the broad belt around her waist, with a plain suggestion of a tail to it equal to any cowboy's shirt on the Arkansas Valley range that day. The skirt was of corduroy, divided into voluminous trousers, set with large

mother-of-pearl buttons down the legs. She wore no spurs; her tawny, weathered hat was weighted by a heavy leather band.

The sun had turned to a reddish tint the ends and light-flying tresses of her heavy, brown hair and had set its little brown pigment spots in her fine-textured skin, like marks of kisses from the lips of an ardent lover. Her eyes were as brown as walnut, and sorrowful as a Madonna's, but in the sorrow of innocence, whose only grief is for a dream.

She saw Uncle Boley up there among the great crowd, and smiled. Texas felt a quiver leap through his body at the sight of her quickened face, as if she had come and laid her hand on his head. It was just like that, he thought; just exactly as if she had come and laid her hand on his bare head. And her smile was not for him at all; as far as he was concerned, her world was empty of men. But if a smile going over a man's head could make him quiver and tingle like that, how would he feel if she gave it to him, right square in the eyes?

That was what Texas wondered, the velvet lady in her glory dim in his thoughts that moment, as Sallie McCoy's name was announced by the man with the megaphone and the gate was opened to the wildest steer on the waiting list.

It was a white animal with a blotch of red across

its loins—the meanest color that a steer could be, and Texas knew it—long-legged, long-horned, and it carried its head high when it rushed out of the pen, as if it was bound for its native Texas and dared any man to stop it on the way. Of course there was a certain advantage in a fast one, Texas reflected, for the faster it went, the harder it would fall. But he had his doubts on the ability of this slender girl, with her small, brown hands, being able to do much with that native of the chaparral.

"He's a regular catamount!" said Texas aloud.

"You said it, pardner," agreed a short, bow-legged man, with a narrow face and long nose, and great black mustache drooping under it like a mourning wreath.

The three judges were mounted, waiting in front of the grand stand to dash out and time the contestant, time beginning the moment that the lariat was thrown. The contestant was allowed the preliminary maneuvering to warm up her horse, limber her arms, and work the steer up in front of the grand stand if she had that desire.

Texas saw from the start that this girl had no such intention. Her aim was to get it over with while her horse was fresh. But the steer seemed to have some crafty design of his own for making a figure in the world. Texas never had seen a swifter one, and few as wild. The animal dashed

around the arena in long leaps, like a deer, yet far out of reach of her lariat, and at every circle past the grand stand the enthusiasm of the spectators grew.

Here at last was the real thing; here was a show for your money, a thing to make you lift in your seat and feel a thrill up your backbone when that handsome girl went by, swift as a leaf on the wind, a whirl of dust behind her, her slender limbs holding her to the saddle as lissom as a sapling in a gale.

Accustomed as these people were to seeing men and women tearing about the town on horseback, there was a quality in this girl's exhibition of riding that held their breath in admiration. There was no thought as to when it would end, or how, only the present wonder of her plastic figure and the moving appreciation of her grace and competence, as she went dashing across the dusty field.

Down in the front where Texas and the bow-legged man stood there was some concern lest the long-winded steer might outlast her horse.

"That feller's a wind-splitter from Arkansaw!" said the bow-legged man.

"He sure is built for speed," Texas replied, his anxious eyes on the whirl of dust through which pursuer and pursued were dimly seen.

"He's a racehorse, cuss him!" The bow-legged

man pushed forward a little as he spoke, and leaned as if concentrating his faculties to influence the steer. "Now! That's the girl—that's the girl!"

The encouraging exclamation had been drawn from him by Sallie's sudden maneuver. Quitting the pursuit of the steer, throwing her weight across the saddle to swerve her horse sharply, she cut across the arena and intercepted the flying animal directly in front of the place where Texas and the bow-legged man stood.

The steer stiffened his legs and slid in his surprised attempt to escape the trap, wheeled, snorted defiance, and made off on a back track. But his checked race had been fatal to his spectacular calculations, if calculations he had inside his wild, long-horned head. Before he could get back to his lost gait Sallie had swung and cast her reata.

It fell true to the mark. Her watchful horse stiffened in his tracks, braced himself, lunged back, as Sallie half flung herself from the saddle on the opposite side to set her weight against the shock. In a second there was a glimpse of wild-flying legs as eight hundred pounds of steer struggled against the tight-strung lariat to get to its feet again.

The grand stand started a cheer when the steer was thrown, but bit it off as if the door of its emotion had been opened untimely. There was not

the sound of a sigh as Sallie ran to the struggling, bellowing animal, her hobble in her hand. The rest of it was only a flash through a cloud of dust.

The grand stand stood to see, and did see, a deft movement of hand and rope, and the next breath, it seemed, the girl standing back out of the dust and confusion. The steer was lying there winded, its four legs gathered and bound like a hog trussed up for market.

Sallie's wise horse, knowing very well when the work was done, eased the strain on the rope, and the grand stand, freed of its tension at the same moment, outdid itself in cheering. The judges released the conquered steer, faced the shouting people, held up hands for silence. Sallie remounted and rode forward with them, and her friends came scrambling over the rail by scores to congratulate her.

The man with the megaphone announced her time. This was seven seconds better than the best made so far, and the opinion was confidently and freely expressed that it could not be beaten. The bow-legged man was so sure of this that he produced money which, he said, stood ready to back that belief against all comers.

Texas saw a tall, soft-shouldered, puffy man, whose black eyebrows were in sharp contrast with the scraped-hog whiteness of his skin, come for-

ward and engage the bow-legged man's money. The judges, as an escort of honor, rode with Sallie to the corral gate, where she continued in her saddle waiting to see the finish.

The man with the megaphone cleared the arena for the closing feature.

CHAPTER III

CLOSE WORK

TEXAS worked his way round to where Sallie McCoy waited on her horse just inside the corral gate. The bow-legged man was talking with her, combing her horse's mane with his fingers.

"They'd just as well hand you the money right now, Miss Sallie," he said.

"You're too sure, Mr. Winch," she returned, laughing a little, all rosy through the faint brown of her face and neck.

Texas Hartwell drew a few slow steps nearer, something timid in his way, to hear again the vibrant music of her voice. What marvels the world held for him that day, he thought; what a vast amount of beauty and sensation it had been keeping from him here in this far-away place. First the one in velvet had taken away his breath, and now this one seemed to be calling the very heart out of his breast. In spite of his efforts to hold it anchored, he knew its peril was great.

"I don't know who this Wichita lady is," the man whom she had called Winch went on, "but I'll bet

seven dollars to one she can't come in half a minute of you."

"I hope you didn't bet any money on me," she said, a bit reproachfully.

Yes, the other one was handsome, with a disdainful, haughty lift to her white chin, thought Texas, but this one was *good.* A man could look right down into her eyes, he'd bet, and see the bottom of her soul all white like pebbles in a spring.

"Didn't we?" Winch wanted to know, with a large discount in his tone. It was as much as if he had asked her how any gentleman could stand aside with money in his pocket and fail to hazard it in the honor of his community, and the heart and jewel of that community, and hope to hold his head up in the eyes of men again. It was a feeling in which Texas shared, and warmed with the generosity of it, his heart applauding the little bow-legged man.

Miss Sallie smiled down to Mr. Winch. Appreciation honestly bestowed, thought Texas. There was not the girl to go about throwing smiles away as if they were trifles to be had for the looking. A man might well leap to catch a smile like that, and put it away in his heart to keep, like a rare poem that has moved his soul.

Mr. Winch did not appear to suspend his breathing on account of it. Texas wondered why. On

the other hand, Mr. Winch was doing some smiling himself, of a rather mirthless and sardonic kind, which lifted his great black mustache as a cat moves its lip before a spring. Peculiar teeth Mr. Winch had, slanting outward, giving his lips a bulge. They gave one the thought that he must have begun very early in his life gnawing, like a beaver, on some hard substance.

"We went the limit, Miss Sallie," he said, "and I've got just seven old bony dollars left that say Miss Fannie Goodnight, nor no other woman from Wichita or anywhere else, can come inside of thirty seconds of matchin' your time."

"I'd be sorry if any of you boys were to lose money on me. Maybe she'll beat me."

"Wait till she does," said Winch, in high confidence of security. "Well, here she comes, and sa-ay people! Look at that ani-mile!"

A bony red steer was passing from the cattle pen into the arena. It was so thin and flat that its ribs could have been counted at twenty yards. The creature was slow and spiritless, seemingly bowed under the weight of its great branching horns. It stopped a few rods beyond the gate and stood with its head down, as if its race had been run long ago and it hadn't the strength to carry it another hundred yards.

Sallie McCoy beheld the creature with amaze-

ment, a flush of indignation burning in her face.

"That thing wasn't in the corral!"

The girl who had made the next best record to Sallie shook her head.

"They drove it in from back there," she said. "It's not on the square—they're goin' to let her rope a ghost."

Texas Hartwell looked hard at the lean and lifeless, desiccated, mangy steer. He stood as if paralyzed by amazement, incredulity in every line of his solemn face. Presently he walked back to the judges, taking the ground in immense strides, like a man who was either very angry or very earnest.

"Gentle-men, you're not goin' to permit this, surely?" He spoke in what seemed a gentle protest. The judges looked down on him indifferently. "Why gentle-men, that thing ain't an animal—it's a dead carcass!"

"We're judges of this game, young man," the eldest of the trio said.

He was a man of congested face and bleached-linen whiteness of hair which told of alcoholic curing. His purple lips were thick, his teeth black and broken, his eyes rimmed with red. A little line of scraggy white brows marked sharply the aggravated redness of his skin.

Texas marked him well, in slow and silent look,

as if gathering points of identification against the meeting of another day. The slow calm scrutiny nettled the man; he spoke sharply:

"We can take care of this without any of your help."

"I allow that, gentle-men," Texas yielded, respectfully, "but I tell you, sirs, I could stand off twenty feet and blow that pore old onery beast over with my breath! The young lady that just finished roped and hobbled one of the wildest animals I ever saw. I want to see her given a square deal, gentle-men; that's all I ask of you."

"Who in the Billy Hell are you?" the youngest of the judges sneered.

That sweeping flush which seemed the leaping pulse of his deepest emotion flooded the young man's face. He stood as if biting a nail, the hard muscles of his lean jaw swelling, holding himself in with an effort. His voice was steady and calm, soft and low, when he replied: "If it was necessary for you to know, to insure justice where justice is due, I could tell you, sir. I assure you that I'm as well known to you as to the young lady I'm speaking in behalf of, sir."

The man with the megaphone was announcing Miss Fannie Goodnight, of Wichita. Cheers greeted her name, but they were blurred by a ques-

tioning murmur, which broke into derisive calls here and there, and loud shrill questions from cowboy throats as to the family of the animal before them.

"You'll have to get out of here!" ordered the red-faced man.

"Clear out—get back over there!"

The youngest of the judges spurred forward, reined in short, brought his horse to its haunches two yards from where Texas stood. The lean, solemn cattleman did not give an inch, but looked the other such a challenge, eye to eye, as would have meant, under other circumstances, the slinging of guns. He turned slowly and went back to the corral gate, where Sallie McCoy was waiting, her face white, a shadow of terror in her sad brown eyes.

Winch looked at Texas curiously, but did not speak, for at that moment Fannie Goodnight started on her conquest of the apathetic steer. She was well mounted, and handled her long-legged horse with every evidence of much experience in the saddle.

As she rode into the field the steer lifted his sad head and trotted to the center, where he stood, entirely unmoved by the scene so widely different from the pastures of his youth. He displayed a little burst of kindling spirit when the velvet-clad beauty made a dash for him, her reata whirling over her

head, even giving her a race round the enclosure that had in it a promise of surprise. The bony creature's unexpected nimbleness provoked laughter and cheers, and genuine expressions of admiration when he checked himself in full career, swerving and dodging like a dog.

It would have passed off very creditably for Miss Goodnight if she had been wise enough to know exactly when to put a stop to this play. But she worked the poor old steer at his tricks so long that she uncovered her hand.

"He's trained for it! I'll bet money she's been puttin' him through them tricks for the last six months, gettin' ready for it," said Winch.

"It looks like it," Texas admitted, more ashamed that a woman would stoop to such sharp practice than concerned over what now seemed the certain loss of the money that he had staked on Sallie McCoy.

A cowboy who had been perched on the fence near by came hurrying over to where Texas stood, pegging along in halting short steps on his ridiculous high heels. He was full of protest against this imposition, and mad to the backbone. But before he could express himself in words an irruption of cheers submerged him. Miss Goodnight had rounded her steer to the most conspicuous point

of the arena, thrown her rope, brought him to the earth.

There the steer lay stretched as pacifically as if he had arranged himself for his afternoon nap, legs extended, head on the ground, the slack barely taken out of the rope. No dust was raised by struggling legs to cut off the view of Miss Goodnight's operations with her hobble. The steer allowed her to bind him with no more resistance than a pet dog.

There were cheers from a certain section of the grand stand where the young lady's partizans appeared to be gathered in force, laughter breaking against the hoarse masculine shouting in rising waves. Texas and Winch stood with watches out, Sallie McCoy on her horse near them so indignant over this dishonest trick that she looked as if she would fight a sack of wildcats.

Miss Goodnight stepped back from her conquest of the steer; the vociferous section of the grand stand lifted a louder cheer, with waving hats. But there was a significant silence in other parts of the crowd, a questioning quietude.

"You beat her anyhow—you beat her to a fare-you-well!" said Winch.

"By seventeen seconds," said Texas, looking up at her openly and boldly for the first time.

"Wait a minute—the judges—"

"*Miss* McCoy! I congratulate you! It was a magnificent victory, magnificently won!"

The speaker was a minister, beyond any mistake, short, round, half-bald, wholly jolly to see in spite of his somber coat. He came up hat in one hand, the other reaching out toward Sallie McCoy while still ten feet away, as if his heart went before him with the warm radiation of his sleek little body.

"The judges—" Sallie began once more, doubtfully.

The judges were approaching the grand stand. The young man who had ridden his horse at Hartwell took the megaphone from the announcer, rode forward from the others a little way.

"The judges—have the pleasure—of announcing—to you"—he spoke in a jerky, ringside delivery that told at once of his apprenticeship, no matter what his present trade—"the winner—of the ladies'—roping—contest. Miss Fannie Goodnight—wins the purse—and the honors—by two seconds—over—her nearest—competitor. I have the pleasure—of introducing—to you—Miss Fannie Goodnight—of Wichita—winner—of this event."

Cheers again from that conspicuous section of the grand stand. Miss Fannie Goodnight was on her horse, nodding her pretty head at her fervent

friends. Now they came pouring down into the arena, while other people who had put money on the local favorite, perhaps, or perhaps out of a spirit of fairness, stood protesting to each other, comparing records, facing angrily toward the judges. In this part of the spectators were many cowboys. These now began to draw together and move down into the arena.

At the announcement of the judges' decision, Hartwell saw Sallie McCoy's face grow white. He looked into the eyes of Winch and the cowboy, and saw there what they in turn read in his. As if given a command to march, they turned and bore down on the judges.

Already these smiling tricksters were receiving the congratulations and thanks of the clique of gamesters with whom they had arranged the plot for a big clean-up. Led by Texas, the three champions of Sallie McCoy pushed through the crowd. Texas stood before the young man who had made the announcement and laid hold of his bridle.

"I know it ain't goin' to do a bit of good to *pro*-test to this decision you've made—"

"Then shut your fly trap!" the young man advised.

"But I want to *ex*-press my sentiments to your faces," Texas continued, holding back his wrath

as a just man does the drawing of his weapon. "I've been among thieves on the highways and byways of the world before to-day, but I never run into a gang that was as low to the ground as you!"

The fellow jerked his reins to throw off Hartwell's hand.

"That's about all you need to say, pardner!" he warned.

"It does about cover the case," said Winch.

"You robbed that girl, and I want to tell you a set of crows that'd do a trick like that'd rob a church!"

Texas flung the bridle reins from him with disdain, making the horse shy and rear. The rider leaned toward him, his face black with rage.

"A bunch of tin-horns like you—"

Words were too weak for him; he cast them aside, spurred his horse forward in a sudden bound, plainly determined to ride his accuser down and trample him.

The crowd fell back with sharp cries. Texas sprang to meet the plunging horse, caught it by the bit, held it while it reared and struck at him in the agony of its rowelled sides. The rider swung his quirt, bringing the heavy, leather-braided handle down on Hartwell's head.

Then followed, as quick as a man could sling a gun and fire, a thing such as no man in that crowd

ever had seen before. The lean cowman threw a hand to the distracted horse's poll, while with the other he held the bit; forced the animal back to its haunches, its fore feet striking; twisted its neck and threw it, as neatly as if he had a rope on its leg.

The rider flung himself from the saddle as the horse fell, and struck the ground with his gun in his hand. There was only the length of the horse between them, and for a moment the bulk of the animal interposed as it struggled to its feet and galloped off. People cleared away from Hartwell like smoke before a wind, leaving him standing alone.

In the old gun-slinging days on the Arkansas Valley range there was but one thing to do when you drew your weapon, and that was to shoot. A draw for a bluff, a moment's hesitation—even the hairsbreadth shading of a moment—was a thing generally fatal to your future calculations. That was where the unhorsed judge fell into error. He stood for a heart-beat with the gun in his hand, as if he did not know the code.

Texas covered the ground between them in a leap. The revolver went off as the humiliated judge fell before the stranger's rush, adding to the confusion of the mixup that the dust and smoke made for a moment indistinct. When things cleared a little Texas had the gun. He threw it

down and set his big foot on it, and met his opponent hand to hand as he scrambled from the ground.

The danger over, the crowd closed around the struggling men again, with cries of derision and encouragement, curses, offers to bet on the outcome. Hartwell had hold of the quirt which the fellow had managed, somehow, to sling to his wrist by its stout leather thong. With a wrench he broke the leather and stepped back with the short rawhide whip in his hand.

There was blood on the judge's face, his hat was trampled under foot, his garments were covered with dust. He stood panting and winded, so heavily overmatched that he seemed to realize the uselessness of renewing the squabble, and to be waiting for some way to open that would let him out of it.

Texas was pulling the slack up out of his sleeve, swinging his long arm like a man getting ready to put a shot. Before many had guessed his intention he had the judge by the neck, and began whipping him as one might beat a vicious dog.

Protests rose as the dust flew out of the fellow's shirt, as he struggled and squirmed and struck wild blows, some of which fell on the man who chastised him, more of which missed. Men who would have held off in an unequal fight with a gun on one side

and none on the other, pressed in and reached out to put an end to the castigation.

That was the point, in the height of the confusion, the heat of the crowd's partizanship, the face of the threat against the stranger, that Winch, the bow-legged man, came to the front. He pushed himself into the little space that Texas kept clear by his whirlwind operations, his coat open, his hands on his guns. His elbows stuck out at a sharp angle, suggestive of steel springs holding them ready to flash those guns before a man could half bat an eye. He leaned forward a little, a peculiar eagerness in his thin face, an electric brightness in his eyes.

"Stand back, gentlemen, and let the law take its course!" said Winch, speaking very mildly, but in a voice that carried far even above the growl of the disgraced man's friends who were running to his support.

The crowd pressed back, the color dropping out of men's faces, whispers running from lip to lip like the ripple of wind over water. Nobody questioned the bow-legged man's authority, nobody put hand to a gun to defend the issue. Texas released his grip on the man's throat, gave him a parting blow in the face with his open hand, broke the whip and threw the pieces after him as he staggered away.

"Here," he called, picking up the gun, breaking it and ejecting the cartridges, "take this thing with you, you ornery houn'!"

In the confusion attending the fight the other two judges rode off and, it appeared also, the bookmakers who had profited by their crooked award had vanished as well. A clamoring crowd of cowboys and cattlemen was sweeping across the field looking for them, and others were hastily fetching their horses and loosening their ropes with unmistakable signs of hostility.

In the whirl of it Texas lost sight of Winch. Although he looked for him with the intention of thanking him for his timely support, the little bowlegged man could not be found. Turning to leave the field, he saw Sallie McCoy, who had ridden up near the place where he had lashed the dishonest judge with his own rawhide. There was something of gratitude and admiration in her face that thrilled him, and an elusive message in her clear brown eyes that warmed him to the marrow and made him proud. He touched his hat as he looked up into her face.

She bent her head a little in acknowledgment of the salute. A rich flood of color rushed over her face, and Texas was not sure, but he believed that she smiled just a little as she wheeled her horse and

galloped away. It was as if she had waited there for that exchange of courtesies, as one who is incapable of smallness in either thought or deed stands by to give a word to another of the same spirit whom he never may meet on the world's long road again. It was an obligation of one brave spirit to another, and, being paid, there was no more to linger for.

Texas watched her as she rode away, and was standing gazing like a man in a dream at the dust that hung after she had passed from his sight beyond the corral gate, when Uncle Boley found him. The old man offered his hand, his blue eyes sparkling with satisfaction.

"You dusted that feller's hide, and you dusted it right!" he said. "It was worth all that gang crooked out of me to see that, and I ain't got no regrets, only that I roped you into it, Texas, and made you drop that roll you won."

"I'm richer a sight, sir, than I was two hours ago," Texas said. "I've got fifty dollars left. It's at your disposal, sir, to the last cent, if you can use it."

"You ain't under no obligations to me that money can pay, Texas."

"Thank you, sir; you're most generous. I was lookin' around for that little man that squared in

here and held that crowd off while I was larrupin' that hide-bound houn'-dog. He seemed to get clean away. Do you know who he was?"

"Yes, that was Dee Winch, one of the nicest little fellers in this town. But I wouldn't thank Dee for what he done, if I was you. He's like me, he don't want anybody to thank him. When you meet him just shake hands with him and look him in the eyes and don't say nothin' at all. Dee he'll understand."

"Yes, sir. He seems to be a powerful nice little man."

"Dee *is* a nice little man, the nicest man, big or little, you'll meet in many a day. Yes, sir, Dee he's killed nineteen men around here in the past four years!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MANHUNTERS

"SO you and your pa put your money in real estate up there in Kansas City when you sold your ranch, and them sharks cleaned you out, eh?"

"They scraped our bones, sir. But I paid out; I don't owe any man, livin' or dead, a cent—in anything that money will pay."

"No, I bet you don't, Texas. Well, I'm glad you give me the inside and straight of your history, for I'm more'n a little petic'lar who I interduce to Sallie McCoy."

"I'm glad to hear you say it, grandpa."

"Don't you 'grandpa' me, gol dern you! I ain't no man's grandpa!"

"No, sir, of course you're not, sir."

"But I may be before I die. I ain't so danged used up as some men of forty-seven I could name."

"Nor some of thirty-five, I bet you a purty, sir."

Well, I can hold up my end of the log along with most of 'em. They all call me Uncle Boley around here, but I ain't nobody's uncle, neither. I don't mind that; I've known boys of ten that was

uncles. You can set in young bein' a uncle, and keep it up as long as you live."

"Yes, sir; you sure enough can, sir."

They were back in Uncle Boley's shop, and the old man was smoking his pipe, the day's work being done. Uncle Boley had insisted that Texas accept the boots from him as an appreciation of the pleasure the afternoon's adventures had given him. The old man said he didn't think it was quite decent for a gentleman to go around in shoes, for a person couldn't tell where his body ended and his legs began in that foot-gear.

Texas had accepted the gift gratefully, and now he sat with his feet crossed, with something in his eyes that looked like pride to Uncle Boley, as he regarded the neat insteps and handsomely quilted tops.

"Have you got a gun, Texas?" The old man turned a shrewd eye on him, his pipestem stayed two inches from his mouth.

"No, sir, I haven't got a gun right now."

The old man smoked a little while, a look of wise contemplation in his benevolent face.

"Yes, I'd git one right away to-night if I was you. Mebbe two."

"Do you suppose I'll have any urgent need for a gun, sir?"

"Well, Texas, I wouldn't be surprised if you did.

Do you know who that feller you larruped was?"

"No, sir, I didn't stop to inquire his name."

"He was Johnnie Mackey, mayor of this town, and owner of the biggest gamblin' house and dance-house-saloon here."

Texas received the information with unmoved countenance. He sat staring out into the street, his legs stretched comfortably in his new boots, as if what he had heard was the lightest of incidental gossip. Uncle Boley watched him covertly, turning his sly old eyes. He liked the way Texas took it; that was a mighty good sign of a man.

"Well, sir, I reckon I had better buy me a gun," Texas said at last, very softly.

Uncle Boley nodded, and smoked on. It was past sunset, and with the cool of the day a freshness had come that invigorated man and beast, and stiffened the drooping leaves of plantain and burdock like a shower.

People were beginning to stir about in numbers surprising compared to the somnolence that had prevailed over Cottonwood when Texas arrived. Some went by with a look of drowsiness about them, as if they had just roused from sleep and were out foraging supper, and these Texas knew by their marks for gamblers and game-tenders, saloon employees and the dusty butterflies wihch flitted under the dance-hall lamps.

Cowboys were trooping in from long rides, others were setting out for their distant ranches. All was astir with a picturesque life that transformed the poor streets, and turned the plank "palaces" and "casinos" into places of romance and mystery.

"Yes, sir, this was a purty decent town till about two weeks ago, a place where every man got a square deal and a show for his money, but it ain't that way any more."

"What happened to change it, sir, if I may ask?"

"Oh, we had a 'lection."

"Sure enough you did; I just *bet* you did!"

"We put that feller—well, I didn't have no hand in it—Mackey in for mayor, and a wall-eyed light-heel in for marshal, turned Dee Winch out to give him the job, and them two they've shut up everything in town they ain't got a hand in or a rake-off on of some kind."

"You could expect it of Mackey, sir. He's a houn'-dog from the rattlesnake hills by the look he wears in his face."

"It's all cow trade in this place, for Cottonwood's a cow town, and you know what it takes to draw cowboys and that kind. It takes noise and show and fiddlin' and singin'. Up to a week ago we had two big dance halls, Jud Springer's and Mackey's. Both of 'em had bands fiddlin' till the mayor up and ordered the aldermen to pass a law forbiddin'

music in places where liquor was sold. The marshal he went right down and stopped Jud's music, and the fiddlers and tooters all got a job playin' for the mayor. Of course he wouldn't put the law to his own place."

"So the business all went there, followin' after the music, which is very natural," Texas said.

"Yes, mostly. But Jud he got three or four musicians together and went ahead, and then the mayor sent a gang of gun-slingers down there and pitched everybody out and locked the door with a padlock and chain. They took Jud to the depot and told him to light out of here on the first train that stopped, and Jud he went. I don't know what he's goin' to do about it, but I know he ain't through. Jud ain't that kind of a man."

"I would hope not, sir."

"So you see what kind of a feller Mackey is. You was kind of takin' chances when you laid that rawhide to that scamp, but I glory in what you done. Yes, if I was in your place, Texas, I believe I'd git me a *couple* of guns."

"Yes, sir, I don't know but what I will, sir."

Uncle Boley went into the back room, which was his parlor, kitchen and bedroom all together, and came back with a revolver and belt. He sat with the belt over his knee, the big weapon in its chafed holster resting on the floor, saying nothing at all

about it for a good many minutes. He seemed to be considering something, his hand on the leather in a touch like a caress.

"Here's a gun, Texas, that a friend of mine used to pack, the best man I ever knew, and the best friend I ever had. He died with it on him, and his widder give it to me. Just feel the weight of that gun, will you?"

"It *is* a man's gun, sir," said Texas, drawing it from the holster with hand that told it was no stranger to such an operation.

"That gun belonged to Ed McCoy, Sallie McCoy's father. He died with it on him; the man that killed him never give him a show to use it."

"Miss Sallie is an orphan, then?"

"Half orphant; her mother's livin'. They've got the best house in Cottonwood, and the purtiest place, but that's all they have got. Yes, sir, Sallie she needed the money them fellers beat her out of to-day; it'd 'a' been like a rain in a drouth to them. I don't suppose anything else *but* the need of it'd 'a' drove Sallie to go out there in public and take a hand in that ropin'. She's a lady, that girl is, from the heels up."

"It's a scan'lous shame that she was beaten out of it! Do you suppose she'd accept—"

"I s'pose she'd claw a mile of hide off of your

skelp if you was to mention acceptin' money to her!"

"As payment for the use of her horse, sir," Texas explained, his homely face burning from the old man's vehement correction.

"She'll git on till school opens. She's got a job for then, the first she ever was obliged to take. When Ed was alive they wallered in money, and they'd 'a' had plenty to last 'em all their lives if they'd 'a' got a square deal. They was beat out of a lot of money; I'll tell you how it was.

"Ed McCoy was the man that started this town. He was the first man that ever drove a herd of cattle up from Texas to load here, and he done it when other cowmen said it couldn't *be* done and come out on it. He made a pile of money at it the first few years, but when them Texas cattle begun to spread the fever up here, and the cowmen on this range got to kickin', Ed he quit drivin' and started up the cattle business with a man name of Henry Stott, a kind of a half-breed Dutchman with eyes in his head like a hog.

"Well, sir, a drouth hit us here about three years ago and nearly cleaned up this range, and McCoy and Stott they bought at their own price right and left. All the money Ed had went into stock. They must 'a' had five or six thousand head that fall when the rains set in and the grass popped up. It

looked like the biggest thing Ed ever had done, for he was the brains of it; Stott wasn't nothing but the guts.

"Well, sir, they found Ed McCoy dead out there on the prairie one day that fall, shot through the back of the head. Stott was away in Kansas City with a shipment, and it never has been found out who done that low-down job. Anyhow, to cut it off short, when it come to arrangin' and settlin' up what Ed left, by golly it come to pass he didn't leave nothin' but the house here in Cottonwood. No, sir, Henry Stott he brought out a note showin' Ed owed him sixty thousand dollars, borrowed money.

"All signed up by Ed, and all as straight as a die, the lawyers said. But the widder and Sallie they didn't have no track of that money, didn't know anything about the deal. What did Ed do with it if he got it? Gambled it off, some said. Well, I know better; Ed never set foot in a gamblin' house as long as I knew him, and that was back in Mezoury twenty years before I come out here."

"But the money was gone, sir?"

"It was gone if it ever was paid in, son. I tell you, as I've told many a man face to face, and as I've told that hog-eyed Henry Stott face to face, it never was paid. That note was either a forgery, or else it was signed by Ed for something else and

filled in after he was dead. Sallie and her ma brought suit, but the court upheld Stott, and that ended it, I guess, till the judgment day. But I'd like to see Henry Stott's face when he stands up before the throne! My-y-y Lord, I'd like to see that dam' Dutchman's face!"

"Is he still around here?"

"Yes, he's here, as big as a stuffed buzzard. He's got a bank down on the corner of the square, and money to burn. But he don't burn any of it, nor hand any of it out where it belongs, as fur as anybody ever saw. And this here's pore old Ed's gun. It never was drawed except in the right, and it never was put back in the leather without honor. It'd be a credit to any man to pack that gun."

"It sure would be, sir."

"Yes, and I'm keepin' it by me chancin' I may be called on to go out and use it one of these days. I'm the man of that family now, you might say, though I ain't no kin. I can shoot, too, I can sling a gun as quick as any man of forty-seven you can name!"

Texas was looking across the street at four men who had come lounging along the plank sidewalk throwing inquiring glances toward the little shop, talking among themselves in low voices. They were all too cautious and watchful for ordinary

business or pleasure, something suppressed and alert about them which told Texas at once that they were looking for him.

At the angle that he was looking through the door Uncle Boley could not see them. He started when Texas drew his feet back and sat up stiffly, seeming to grow several inches as his muscles set to meet the emergency of life or death which he knew he should soon be called upon to face. He believed the gang that had been sent out to hunt him had not seen him yet. He got up and stood aside a little from the open door.

"What's the matter?" Uncle Boley inquired, leaning to see.

Texas motioned silently toward the street, his eyes on Ed McCoy's gun with a flame in them such as burns from a man's soul when he rises to the sublimest heights of courage. He felt that his hour had come, but he was ready.

"It's the mayor's gang—they're after you!" the old man said.

Texas reached out for the revolver. Uncle Boley strapped the belt round the waist of his new-found friend, his hands trembling in the strain of the situation.

"Go out the back door—I'll hold 'em here till you're gone!" he said.

"You mean for me to *run,* sir?"

"Well no, Texas, I don't mean for you to just run. But they's four of them fellers, and ever' one of 'em's—"

"If there were forty of them, sir, you couldn't ask me to run!"

The old man looked at him, a mist coming into his quick blue eyes.

"No, I couldn't even throw a hint, Texas."

Texas tightened the belt, snapped out the gun, changed the cartridges, working so fast that the old man gasped in admiration. He smiled, and held out his hand to Uncle Boley.

"I wish to thank you for your many kindnesses to me, a stranger in your door, sir," he said. His voice was as light and steady, his eyes as eager, as if he was about to mount his horse and ride away on some pleasant adventure.

Uncle Boley pressed the young stranger's hand—a stranger grown suddenly as dear to him as a son returned from his far wanderings—and Texas turned with quick step and passed out into the street.

CHAPTER V

FOUR TO ONE

THERE were certain precautions to be observed in Cottonwood in killing a man, for no matter how worthless or obscure a man might be in that town, nobody knew what powerful friends or relatives might be uncovered elsewhere by his sudden death. Friends, relatives, money in the family, political influence, sometimes meant the utmost penalty of the law for his slayer. So it was a matter of common prudence to have the plea of self-defense to stand on, with witnesses to maintain it.

For that reason alone the four gun-slingers did not pull out weapons and kill Hartwell the moment that he stepped into the street. A quarrel had to be provoked first, and the victim badgered into putting his hand toward his gun, or making a start as if he intended to do it. Some shadow of justification must be contrived. Many a man had been killed on the cattle-ranges for starting to take his handkerchief out of his pocket. That was the beginning of the cowboy fashion of wearing that article around the neck.

Texas stood a moment framed in the open door, in the manner of a man undecided which way he will turn when he has no definite business ahead of him. The four men across the street scattered out of the close formation that they had maintained as they came along, as if they expected hostilities to open immediately. Texas did not betray any evidence that he was even aware of their existence, much less their presence not more than sixty feet distant, where they stood convicted of their intention by their flighty start.

There was a telegraph-pole in the edge of the sidewalk a little way along the street from Uncle Boley's door, the planks trimmed to fit round it. Texas sauntered along to it with the deliberate air of a man who had the night ahead of him, leaned his back against it, and began to roll a cigarette. Two of the mayor's committee started across the street, the other two shifting down to a stand diagonally across from the spot where Texas stood.

Texas ran his eye over them, and kept it on them sharply, for all that he seemed engrossed in the task of contriving his cigarette. They had the appearance of men such as stood lookout over faro games, and worked as bouncers in the rough resorts common to that country and time. Three of them wore white shirts and the little narrow-brimmed derby hats which were popular among the frontier

gamblers of that day. The other was a composition of cowboy and sport. Texas recalled having seen him at the show.

The pair approaching Texas crossed over to the sidewalk a little way below him, where they stood waiting for their companions to join them. These latter came over in the cautious manner of men stalking game, walking two yards apart, one a little in advance of the other, watching Texas for the first movement of hostile demonstration.

People in shop doors and on the street knew at once what these preparations portended. Many battles had been fought out in the open on that ground, frequently with more damage to those not engaged than to the principals. It had come to the point where nobody took chances, and with this gathering of the battle-cloud before their doors the storekeepers retreated to the backs of their shops, and put something solid between them and the street; pedestrians dodged behind buildings and into the shelter of open doors. In an emergency like that a sod house was the most popular structure within reach.

One of the men came up within three yards of Texas, watching him at every step as closely as he would have watched a trapped bear.

"Sport, there'll be a train along here in twenty minutes, and you're goin' to take it," he announced.

Texas glanced up from the contemplation of a match that had failed to ignite against the telegraph-pole, with a look in his face as if he had been philosophizing on its weakness, and drawing comparisons between it and the failure of a friend in the hour of necessity.

"Were you addressin' me, sir?" he asked.

"I was addressin' you, pardner. You take to the middle of the road and trot ahead of us, and you make a start right now!"

Texas tried the match again, looked at the head of it with a little cloud as of sorrow and disappointment in his face, as if the undoubted discovery of its unworthiness had hurt him deeply. He stood a moment, the unlit cigarette in his lips, his head bent a trifle, as if thinking more of the match than the man.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm not ready to leave this evenin'."

Indifferent, unmoved, as he seemed, Texas was set like a hair-trigger, watching every man of them, the match in his fingers, his hand just a few inches above the butt of his gun.

Heads were put cautiously around corners of buildings and out of doors to investigate this delay and silence in the street. The spokesman of the gunners' committee came half a step nearer.

It was not meant that Texas should take the

train out of Cottonwood that evening, or ever again. The command to take the road and trot ahead of them had been given with the accent of insult to make it gall deeper, in the belief that it would be resented by the man of spirit whom they knew Texas to be. His failure to fly up all afire as they had expected, and give them what they would call a justification for their deed was a circumstance upon which they had not counted.

Inside his little shop Uncle Boley felt the strain of waiting. He hoped that Texas had not changed his mind after coming in sight of them and given them the dodge; he hoped it sincerely, for the honor of the gun that he wore. Unable to stand the uncertainty of the situation any longer, he went to the door and stood there boldly, his long beard like a white apron down his vest.

"I'm sorry to refuse," said Texas, and with that word flipped the unburned match from his fingers.

At that little movement the man in front of Texas threw his hand to his weapon. Uncle Boley always said that he lost track of things from that point. But he was certain that the man who started to draw his gun never got any farther with it than just clear enough of the holster to let it fall when Texas nipped him through the wrist-bone.

There was a good deal of smoke and a lot of noise around the telegraph-pole where Texas stood

with his back to it, and Uncle Boley was so excited that he found himself out on the sidewalk, right in the middle of things, when he got hold of the swift-running events again.

The man who had started to sling down on Texas was holding his crippled arm, making no effort to pick up his gun with his whole hand. The other three were not in sight, but some shots came from the corner of a building fifty yards down the street, doing no damage.

Texas was loading his gun, his cigarette in his lips, quite calm and undisturbed. There were two little hard hats on the sidewalk where the three men had stood, a hole in each of them that Uncle Boley said he could have shoved his fist through.

The crowd came filling into the street as silently as water, not a word in any man's mouth. The shot hats were picked up, the press swallowed the man with the shattered wrist, and people with white faces and big, wondering eyes stood off a little way in a ring around Texas, with a strained, fearful respect in their attitude, as if ready to burst away and run at his slightest movement.

Uncle Boley pushed his way through to Texas. The young man had put his pistol in the holster, and was standing with his head bent a little, in his thoughtful, contemplative pose, as if bowed with regret for the necessity of the swift adjustment

he had made in that unfair attempt to take his life. Uncle Boley said afterward that he knew Texas was not hit, because he didn't stand on his legs like a man with a bullet in him. Uncle Boley had seen too many of them in that fix to make a mistake.

"You got 'em, ever' dern one of 'em!" Uncle Boley said, his old eyes lively with the pride that seemed to lift him and make him young again.

"No, sir, I got mostly hats," Texas replied, his eye-warming smile kindling a glimmer for a moment on his lips.

"Yes, and that crowd'll know who to monkey with next time, I bet you a button!" the old man said, turning to the people round him, giving it off with impressive authority. "Come on in, Texas, gol dern 'em!"

It was a high and mighty moment for Uncle Boley when he opened the crowd on the sidewalk to his little shop door, Texas coming along behind, a hand on the old man's shoulder with something in the touch of unbounded gentleness and affection.

A commotion in the crowd caused them to stop at the door and look back. Texas's right hand hovered over his revolver in that ready, watchful poise that he had held when he stood with his back to the telegraph-pole, the match in his fingers.

But the gun-slingers were not rallying to battle again. It was the mayor and the city marshal.

The mayor stopped near the pole, where there was a wide blot of blood on the boards of the sidewalk, a trail running off from it marking the way the crippled man had gone.

"They didn't get him!" said the mayor with a curse.

"He's over there," said somebody. The mayor looked and saw Texas waiting with his old whiskered friend for the outcome of the mayor's miscarried plot.

"Arrest that man!" the mayor ordered, giving it as a general command to the public.

"You let that kid alone, Johnnie," said a soft, calm voice behind Texas.

Texas looked to see who had lifted a word for him in that place, where every face expressed either hate of him or fear. It was the lady in the green velvet dress, her little silver trinkets and ornaments white against the rich cloth in the blur that was coming into the passing day. Texas put his hand to his hat in grateful acknowledgment. She smiled as the wind moved the long hair on his temples.

"I saw it all," she said, speaking to the mayor with a cold, commanding directness. "You let that kid alone!"

A sneer jerked the mayor's face, which grew paler at her word. He was a slender man of medium

height, with a clerkly fairness of skin, fair hair cut close to his small head, small ears pressed tight against his skull. But a man with something behind the mask of his commonplace face, something ungrasped at the first look, which grew elusive as one studied it and groped to define it; a something that left a sense of disquietude in the mind, a feeling that this man would come again into the business or the tragedy of one's days, and for no good purpose ever.

He turned his back to her with a quick, uplifting shake of the head, as of defiance, or threat of future adjustment, pushed into the crowd and disappeared. With another smile, and a direct look into his eyes that brought the blood to Hartwell's lean cheeks, the velvet lady followed after the mayor. Uncle Boley touched his young friend's arm; they went in and shut the door.

"You showed them light-heels!" Uncle Boley exulted. "Yes, and I'll bet four bits Johnnie Mackey will have to do some tall lookin' around before he can hire another crowd to tackle that job, by granger!"

"It was uncommonly generous for that young lady to speak up for me," said Texas reflectively, still in that mood of thoughtful depression that seemed to have settled over him like a cloud.

"I don't know who that Fannie Goodnight is, but she's got a rope on Johnnie Mackey's leg. Yes, and I'll bet four bits she can flop him quicker'n she did that shadder of a steer any time she wants to. That white-eyed son-of-a-gun's a-scairt of her; he wilted like a frosted turnip when she dressed him down."

"He did seem to act like he'd taken orders from her before. Well, sir, do you reckon I'll be taken up for what I had to do?"

"They can't take a man up in Cottonwood for defendin' his life," said Uncle Boley, a sort of triumphant pride in the immunities of his town. "The thing's settled as fur as any lawin's goin' to come in. I reckon a hundred people could be called up that saw them fellers crowd that fight on you."

"I hope they could," sighed Texas.

"I was standin' right there in that door when that feller made that pass to sling his gun down on you."

Uncle Boley chuckled at the recollection.

"You moved so dang swift I couldn't tell how you done it, but I can swear till the cows come home that he made the first break toward a gun."

"I'm glad to hear you say it, sir. That young lady remarked that she saw it, too. Two reliable

witnesses ought to get a man off from a little fuss like that."

Texas unbelted the gun and offered it to the old man.

"That's a good and a true gun, sir. It came up to what was expected of it, like a friend a man can depend on."

"Keep it; buckle it on you and wear it, son. I've been waitin' for a man to come along that was big enough to stand up under Ed McCoy's gun. It's yours now."

A flush of pride came over the good, homely face of the young man as he drew the big gun from the holster and laid its long barrel in his palm. He stood looking at it with such a tenderness in his eyes as might have gladdened a woman's heart.

"I hope I'll never be called on to sling this gun down on any man again," he said, his voice earnest and low, "and I never will draw it except to defend my life or what belongs to me, or the life or property of somebody not able to fight for himself."

It was as if he pronounced the words of a vow, or the spirit of Ed McCoy had come to confront him, demanding a pledge of his worthiness.

"And I'm a goin' to turn my face around, sir, and see if there isn't some justice to be had for those left behind by the man that used to wear this

gun. If the day ever comes that I have to draw it in that cause, I'll use it till I drop with it in my hand, so help me God!"

"Amen!" said Uncle Boley, his head bowed as if he had listened to a prayer.

CHAPTER VI

THE WANDERER'S RETURN

OUTSIDE Uncle Boley's window the crowd had thinned away; traffic was running in the street again as if tragedy had not stood there a little while before and paralyzed its stream. From the heart of the town, two squares away, the sound of music came through the twilight.

"I can take you around and interduce you to Sallie and her mother now," Uncle Boley said. "I tell you, Texas, a feller purty near has to come with his papers in his hand before I'll do that much for him."

"I'll warrant you he does, sir, and I'm mighty proud to have you trust me as worthy of the honor. But I don't feel like I ought to go fresh from a qua'l and a brawl into that little lady's presence, sir, and take her by the hand."

"She'll be glad to see you, and she'll be keen to understand. You done it for her, Texas. If you never had 'a' stood up for her rights to-day this thing never would 'a' happened."

"To-day!" said Texas musingly, reviewing the events which had filled his few hours in Cotton-

wood. "Yes, it *was* to-day, wasn't it? Sir, it seems to me like I have been here a hundred years!"

"I want you to wear Ed's gun when you meet 'em. That's the biggest recommend I can give you—that I thought you fit to pack that gun."

"I'll have to get me a coat, sir, and some other things. I'm not presentable to ladies to-night. I beg you, sir, to put it off another day."

"Well, we can't go to-morrow night, 'cause there's an ice-cream festibul at the Methodist church, and Sallie and her ma they're head and heels into it. But I tell you what we *can* do: we can go to the festibul."

"I'll get trimmed up a little for it."

"Trimmed up?" Uncle Boley looked him over with questioning stare. "I don't see what more a man needs when he's got a good pair of boots and his hair combed."

"Customs differ in different places, sir. To-morrow I'll have to see if I can find something to do, Uncle Boley. I can't afford to be idle many days."

Uncle Boley sat thoughtfully silent a while, gathering his beard in his hands like a sheaf of grain.

"The association wants to hire two or three trail-riders, I hear," he said at last.

"Trail-riders? You don't mean men to carry mail, sir?"

"No, I mean trail-riders, just plain trail-riders."

"I don't believe we had 'em in Taixas, sir."

"No, I guess you didn't. Trail-ridin' is a new profession—it sprung up in this country in the last two years, since the cattlemen all went into the association to keep the Texas fever out of the Arkansas Valley range. Well, you bein' from Texas, maybe they wouldn't give you a job."

"Has it got something to do with keeping Taixas cattle out of this part of the country, sir?"

"It's got all to do with it. You know them Texas herds drops fever ticks around here sometimes as thick as beans, and the association's been tryin' to git Congress to pass a law settin' a quarantine line ag'in 'em. Congress ain't took no action on it, but the association's set certain trails for them Texas cattle to foller when they drive 'em up to this country to ship, and the trail-riders is the fellers that sees they take to 'em and keep to 'em."

"I understand it, sir."

"You can't blame the cattlemen on this range if they *have* laid out trails that takes Texas cattle to hell-and-gone around and nearly wears 'em out before they git to where they're goin'. Texas fever's cost 'em millions on this range in the past five or six years, and it's either go out of business,

or turn the range over to the Texas cowmen, or shut 'em out. Well, the association figgers they'll make more money by shuttin' 'em out."

Uncle Boley chuckled. He had many recollections of the clashes which had come between Texas and Kansas cattlemen over the quarantine trails.

"What do the trail-riders do, sir, if the Taixas cowmen refuse to keep to the trails set for them to drive over?"

"They pass the word back to headquarters down on Malcolm Duncan's ranch, and men enough's sent down to turn 'em, by granger! They have some purty sharp argyments sometimes."

"A man would need a good horse for that job," Texas reflected.

"Yes, he would, or for most any job, but some of them triflin' things I asked you about and you said you couldn't do. But I guess that could be fixed up, all right. If Malcolm Duncan gives you a job he'll trust you for a horse. They pay them riders eighty dollars a month and found. A man could mighty soon buy a horse out of that."

So they decided, after talking it over fully, that trail-riding offered the best opening for a man of Texas Hartwell's limited business experience in that country. In the morning Texas was to put in his application with Duncan, president of the Cattle Raisers' Association. In the meantime, for a

good clean bed and a welcome like home, Uncle Boley recommended the Woodbine Hotel, kept by Malvina Smith and her mother, Mrs. Goodloe.

"Ollie Noggle, our head-leadin' barber, and several more of our professional men boards there regular, and I take my meals there myself on Sundays," he explained. "It ain't so much of a hotel to look at on the outside, for I don't like the green Malvina had it painted after she got her divorce bill from Zebedee."

"Green's for hope, they say, sir," said Texas, with that queer half-smile of his.

"Yes," said Uncle Boley, wondering what it would take to make him laugh, "and I guess she's goin' to git her hopes fulfilled, all right. Ollie Noggle seems to be leadin' peaceful and quiet. I guess she'll land him before the summer's through. The old lady she'll kind of show off to you a day or two, proud as all git-out over that divorce paper Malvina's got. It's the first one anybody in Cottonwood ever got through a court, and that old lady she shows it off like it was a deed to a ranch."

"It's a queer kind of thing to have a family pride in."

"Yes, I never had much use for divorce bills myself, but it's a curiosity to some folks. The neighbors is as much to blame as the old lady, and more. They used to go there in droves at first to see it,

and set around and gab about every other thing in the lands below the firmament. But all the time they was eatchin' to see that dang fool paper, and the old lady was as tickled as if she was takin' snuff."

"You don't tell me!"

"Yes, and she'd let 'em eatch and squirm till she got 'em worked up so they felt like they was settin' over steam, then she'd grin her old yeller teeth as big as a horse's, and say: 'Show 'em your divorce paper, Malvina.' "

"That sure was a divertin' kind of a game."

"Yes, and she'll try to work your curiosity up to the blisterin' heat that way, too. Well, when she'd say that, Malvina she'd blush and simmer, and git up and go to the press and take that old fool paper out from between the ironed sheets where she kep' it from wrinklin', and hand it around like it was the Declaration of Independence, with John Hancock's name on it you could read forty feet. Huh! derned old fool thing for a passel of women to glommer over, wasn't it?"

"I expect it was because every married lady may have a secret longing to own a document of the same kind herself some day, sir."

"Oh, you git out! I've knowed women you couldn't separate from their old men with a maul and wedge."

"They are exceptions, I have no doubt, sir."

"Yes, a notion like that ortn't keep a man from marryin'. He ort to marry young, and stay married, even if he has to do it over a couple of times."

"I'm not skeptical on the subject of marriage, or of the fidelity of the ladies, sir. I was merely remarkin'. What became of Zebedee, or what did he do to occasion the divorce?"

"Zebedee he went down to the Nation about three years ago to look around. He never come back, and he never wrote. Malvina got tired of dependin' on him to let her hear whe'er he was livin' or dead or married to a squaw, and she got her bill. Can't blame Malvina, she always had to make the livin' anyhow, and she's a real purty little chunk of a woman, but I never did agree that her red hair matched that green paint on the hotel."

So, with the history of Malvina Smith like an open book in his hand, Texas left Uncle Boley for the night. His first thought was to seek a store and buy himself a coat, for he was reluctant to appear before even the red-haired holder of the only divorce paper in Cottonwood in his shirt-sleeves. Shirt-sleeves were well enough for business hours, but out of business hours a gentleman ought to have a coat. That was the opinion of Texas, and all the usages in the world to the contrary could not have bent him from it an inch.

Texas walked warily through the main street of Cottonwood, where gasoline-lamps on posts made a very good illumination, together with the brightness that radiated from the windows. He kept his hand hovering over his gun, and turned his head this way and that, like a man in the enemy's country where he believes every hand hostile.

He knew himself to be a man marked for destruction. That sentence he had read in the mayor's exclamation of angry disappointment when he found that Hartwell had not been slain, and the look of his eyes the moment that he turned and hid himself in the throng. There would be strain and disquietude, high tension and uncertainty, every hour that he remained in Cottonwood. He considered whether it would not be the best and wisest thing, for his own safety and peace, to leave the town at once.

Then there came flashing back to him the picture of Sallie McCoy as she sat there in her saddle when he stood alone after thrashing the mayor. The warm feeling of pride that had stirred in him then like a heroic resolution expanded over his body again. He felt that the unspoken message that had passed from eye to eye between them in that moment had been a pledge of some undreamed, embryonic thing of the future, still nebulous and misty, still not understood. But of something rest-

ful to the buffeted soul and weary body, like the "shadow of a rock in a desert land."

His feet felt planted in that town; it was indeed as if he had been there many years, and had become a figure in the place. He could not go; he could not turn away, at least not so far that he could not ride back in a day or two, like the cowboys from the range around. He felt that he had been directed to Cottonwood, and into the adventures of this day, to become the instrument of a good and noble purpose.

That girl's father had carried this weapon that pressed against his thigh in the assurance of defense, like the hand of a trusted friend in the dark. Surely it was not merely the chance of a day that had put the weapon in his keeping; surely the words which he had spoken when the old man gave him the title of ownership to it had not sprung out of an empty heart or boastful mind. Time had shaped him to a purpose in that land; circumstances had placed in his hand the key to unlock mysteries, the power to adjust wrongs. The events of that day had been written into his life's program a long time in advance.

Texas appeared at the Woodbine Hotel a little while after the soft summer darkness had engulfed Cottonwood, its crudities and its sins, wearing a black coat which gave him a very professional ap-

pearance above the middle thigh. This coat he had found in a store called the Racket, kept by a Jew who wore spectacles with thick lenses, and was a very worm of a man in his apparent humility.

The length of this garment—it was of the style called Prince Albert, much favored even to this day in Missouri and Arkansas by country barristers and barbers and negro preachers—seemed to increase Hartwell's height by several inches, and gave him a dignified and decent appearance, indeed. It had the added advantage of a screen for his revolver, thus taking away from him the appearance of challenge that his armament seemed to inspire. Texas was pleased with it, the fit of it in the shoulders, the comfortable feeling of being dressed that it gave him, in spite of the great sweat that it threw him into, for it was a still, warm night.

There was nobody in the office of the Woodbine Hotel, but through the open door leading to the dining-room Texas could see a party gathered at supper around a long table. The cackle and chatter proclaimed a celebration of some kind, which he was reluctant to interrupt. As he waited for somebody to appear and inquire into his wants, he saw a small bell on the show-case, such as teachers once used to call up classes, and pasted inside the glass a card with "Wring" written in ink as weak and inassertive as an old person's voice.

Mrs. Goodloe answered the bell. There was no mistaking her after Uncle Boley's mention of her teeth. Texas never had seen teeth to compare with those in any human mouth. They were as broad as thumb-nails, yellow as old teacups, and a shortage in the goods of which her upper lip had been cut had left their owner without means of concealing them save by an effort which brought on a spasmodic convulsion of the face, alarming and distressing to behold.

This operation Mrs. Goodloe seemed to consider a necessary preliminary to speech. It could be effected only by pulling down the short upper lip, and that tension in turn tightened the skin on her large nose and drew it down from her eyes, giving Mrs. Goodloe a most startled and astonished look.

She stood in the door, her face arranged in this manner, saying nothing, but looking Texas over as if in doubt whether he was *cura* or cowboy. Her face was red, and sweat glistened on it, as if she had put down some violent task to answer his summons. He inquired about accommodations, mentioning Uncle Boley.

At the mention of Uncle Boley Mrs. Goodloe smiled. It came on her so suddenly, and was so vast in extent, that she looked as if she had ripened and burst, like a touch-me-not, and was about to sow a crop of teeth.

"Yes, we can put you up, but I'll have to ask you to wait a little while before I can fix you up a room. My daughter's just been married, and we're givin' an infare supper."

"There's no hurry at all, ma'am; don't interrupt the festivities on my account. I'll just sit out here and read the paper, if you don't mind?"

She bustled about a bit, pleased with his appearance and the sound of his voice, so gentle and soft compared to the high, loud key of the usual cowboy, and got him a later paper than the one on the counter.

"We get the Kansas City papers the next day after they're printed now," she told him, with pride in the metropolitan stamp that it gave Cottonwood; "they come through in a hurry since they put on the cannon-ball."

She hurried back to the feast. Texas arranged himself to read the paper, the clash of cutlery on dish, the mingled voices in loud hilarity, attesting to the enjoyment that was under way within.

From where he sat he could see the head of the table, the bride and groom facing him, Malvina unmistakable on account of her red hair. At the corner of the table on the bride's other hand was the little round minister whom Texas had seen at the fair.

There were ten or a dozen other guests, and they

were eating boiled ham and mashed potatoes, and fried chicken heaped in a great brown mountain on a tremendous dish. This dish Mrs. Goodloe was carrying up the line. As she passed from guest to guest Texas could hear her say, in unvarying formula, with unvarying accent of generous invitation and urging, her voice as plain as if she stood behind his chair:

"Won't you have some of this here fried chicken? Won't you have some of this here fried chicken?"

She had almost reached the groom, known to Texas at the first glance as the head-leadin' barber whom Uncle Boley had mentioned, by his big black mustache, his narrow face and oiled hair; Mrs. Goodloe was even approaching him, when there came in from the street a man whose demeanor and appearance at once drew the attention of Texas from the wedding banquet.

This was a bristling, big, bony man, sour-faced, red-eyed. His shirt was as red as the grates of inferno, and his mustache was red under his long, ill-favored nose. He had the appearance of one who had come in from a long journey, and there was a sullenness in his small eyes as if he sat up nights to nurse a grudge. He wore a white silk handkerchief around his neck; on his boots Mexican spurs with rowels as big as silver dollars.

"Ain't nobody tendin' to business in this joint?"

he inquired, his voice rough in that hoarseness that much raw liquor puts into a man naturally pitched in a low key.

"They're inside there havin' an infare party. If you'll hit that bell—"

"Whose infare party?"

The man turned to Texas with such ferocity that it gave him the appearance of being the traveling opponent of infare parties, a sort of walking delegate for the suppression of infare parties, and the elimination of such light frivolity from the somber business of life.

"Not mine, sir," said Texas, resenting the man's front, and his air of accusation and blame.

"Whose in the hell, then?"

"Smith was her name. She's the lady that runs the ranch."

The stranger stepped back from the counter and looked into the dining-room. Mrs. Goodloe had reached the groom with the platter of fried chicken, to which he was helping himself with great elegance and liberality, spearing deep into the pieces with his fork, pushing them free from the tines with his handy thumb.

There the stranger stood a little while, harsh of outline, the dust of long roads on his red shirt, a big gun dangling at his side.

Mrs. Goodloe had assisted the bride to the deli-

cacy, which she bore high on her shoulder like a hod, when the man walked into the dining-room, his spurs clicking on the floor, his hat-brim pushed up flat against the crown as if a strong wind struck him in the face.

And by the hush that fell, like the silence of a broken fiddle-string, Texas Hartwell knew that the stranger was Zebedee Smith, the man who had gone to the Nation to look around.

CHAPTER VII

THE LISTENING MAN

TEXAS put down the paper and went over to the door to see how the situation was going to untangle. It was a complication such as he never had heard of, and was curious to know what view Zebedee Smith was going to express. Texas did not believe that Mr. Ollie Noggle would rise to any remarkable height in the discussion, basing his judgment entirely on the barber's loud and frequent laughter.

There was no laughter in the groom's face now as Mrs. Goodloe put down the dish of chicken with an exclamation that sounded like somebody taking the lid off a hot kettle. His face was white, and he had hold of the table as if to keep himself from falling under it. Malvina's eyes were big, as if she strained them to convince herself that it was the flesh and bone of Zeb Smith that confronted her, and not his dusty spirit from some dusty realm beyond this world.

"Why, Zeb Smith!" said the minister, rising from his chair. "Where in this world did you come from?"

Zeb had stopped a few feet from the end of the table, where he stood looking fiercely at Malvina.

"Couldn't even marry a man!" he said.

His voice was as hoarse as the hot winds, something in it so suggestive of scorching vitals and burning passages that one felt impelled to offer him water.

Mrs. Goodloe recovered herself quickly, resentment of this intrusion clearing her mind of surprise. She went around the table and confronted Zeb, her arms bare to the elbows, the recollection of old indignities hot in her face.

"You git out of here, Zeb Smith!" she commanded. "You don't own a stick in this place and you ain't got no right to set your foot in it! You never was no good and you never will be, you sneakin' old devil!"

"I'll show you who's got a right and who ain't!" Zeb threatened. "A man's home's where his wife lives. That's the law. And here I come home and find my wife settin' at the side of a feller she thinks she's married to, eatin' a infare supper with a passel of people that's aigged her on into bigamy. I'll make you smoke—I'll make ever'one of you smoke!"

The barber had slipped down in his chair until he sat on the middle of his spine. He appeared to have shrunk in upon himself to about half his

original size, and he was clinging desperately to the table to keep his head above the water of complete disgrace.

Malvina looked at the preacher, a pathetic appeal in her eyes, and the preacher turned to Smith.

"Why, Smith, she's divorced from you, regularly divorced," he said. "The requirements of the law have been met with; you have no claim on her whatever."

"Ain't I?" Zeb wanted to know, a darker threat than before in his attitude and word. He advanced to the foot of the table. "I'm a goin' to walk up the middle of that table and kick that crock of clabber between the eyes, then I'm a goin' to smash this joint to kindlin' and take that woman by the hair of the head and whip her through this town with a blacksnake! I'll show her how she can disgrace me and drag my name in the dirt!"

He made a move as if to set foot on the table. The guests at that end rose in panic, and retreated to the wall, where they stood looking at Smith, afraid of him, but their curiosity to know what he was going to do holding them there at the risk of his violence. The preacher went to him and tried to reason it out, making mention of the regularity of the proceedings, bearing down on the divorce.

"Divorce nothin'! I don't believe she ever got any divorce!" Zeb swore.

Mrs. Goodloe snapped him up on that like a fish taking a fly.

"Show him your divorce paper, Malvina!"

Trembling, but eager to vindicate herself, Malvina left the table. Texas stood in the door watching it all, ashamed for the bridegroom, who sat there and allowed such gross insults to be heaped upon himself, his bride, their guests.

Malvina came back in three jumps, the paper in her trembling hand. The minister passed it on to Smith, and Mrs. Goodloe made a noise of exultation that sounded as if she tried to crow.

Smith ran his red eyes over the document, grunting now and then. When he had made a speedy end of his inspection he looked hard at the bride, who was standing with her hand on her new husband's shoulder as if to assure him that she would die at his feet before harm should come to one hair of that oiled and scented head.

"It ain't worth hell room!" said Smith. He tore the precious paper across, threw the pieces on the floor, set his spurred heel on them with stamp of contempt.

"Sir—" the minister began.

"You can't divorce a man without servin' notice on him," Smith declared, and with such an amount of judicial severity, judicial certainty, in his tone

that many of them feared for the reputation of Malvina on the spot.

"It won't stick before no court in the land, and I'm goin' to bust it wide open!" Smith declared, looking about defiantly.

Texas saw at a glance how the matter stood in Smith's intention. He had come back to discover more prosperity than he ever had been on speaking terms with before in his life; he saw ahead of him a season of ease and consequence in Cottonwood as the husband of its foremost business woman, and he believed the wedding was only a form, as far as matters had gone, that could be brushed aside.

"Ye-e-es, you'll bust a hamestring gittin' out of here, you onery, low-lived, suck-aig whelp!"

Mrs. Goodloe drew a little nearer to him as she delivered this, shaking her fist close to his sullen nose. The groom drew himself up in his chair a little at this hopeful demonstration.

"Git out o' here, you bum!" he said.

But not very forcibly. It was too plainly weak, in fact, as if he had no confidence in it himself, to act as anything more than an enraging barb under the tough skin of Zebedee Smith.

Then followed a spry little game of hop and dodge between Smith and Mrs. Goodloe, that fair lady's teeth bared in front of him like a rampant

lion's as he made little starts and snarls toward the groom.

Mrs. Goodloe was the only person in the room who was not afraid of Smith to the roots of the hair, for it was not a gathering of fighting people. Texas judged that they were of the professional class mainly, such as saddle-makers, horseshoers, and grocers.

"Let me to him!" said Smith, his hand on his gun.

"You clear out of here before I scald the hide off o' you!" Mrs. Goodloe warned.

She laid hold of the large coffee-pot that stood like a portly guest at the right hand of her plate, and attempted, earnestly and valiantly, to pour its steaming liquor down Zeb Smith's boots. He jumped back as a stream of the aromatic fluid spouted toward him, and saved his legs, but caught it on the toes.

Mrs. Goodloe pushed her advantage, crowding Smith back toward the door where Texas stood. The groom lifted in his place as Smith retreated, like a turtle putting his head up behind a log. Mrs. Goodloe made a long swing with the pot and caught Smith with a good hot stream across the legs above his boots.

Smith let a roar out of him that made the lemon pies on the table quake, and sent the rising courage

of the groom down again with his long body half under the table. Smith drove at the coffee-pot and kicked it high out of Mrs. Goodloe's hand. It fell near the minister, who at once made a jump for the door.

Smith was standing in the steaming confusion, his big gun in his hand, as the minister reached Texas.

"For Heaven's sake, do something—do something!" he appealed.

"Sir, if you wish it," Texas replied.

Texas walked gravely into the room. But under his dignified coat, under the solemn mask of his face, he was not one-tenth as serious as he seemed.

Inwardly, he regretted having to spoil the fun, for it was the best show he had seen in many a day, and he would have liked, above everything, to see how far Smith would go. He laid his hand on Smith's shoulder as he stood there swinging his gun, as if limbering his arm for destruction.

"Sir, you're the man that went off to the Nation one time to look around, I reckon, ain't you?"

Smith glared at him, fixing his mouth in the expression of a man who was in the habit of eating them raw, bending his brows in a most ferocious frown.

"What if I was? Who in the hell're you?"

Texas did not approve of that kind of language

before ladies. Something came into his eyes and changed over his face that caused Smith to alter the set of his jaw.

"I don't reckon you got through lookin' around down there, pardner."

Texas said it with a conclusiveness that made it indisputable. Smith backed away from him, watching him as a coward watches one from whom he expects a well-deserved kick. He fumbled for his holster as he put his big gun away. The barber was rising again, stretching his long neck to see, and Smith backed on toward the door.

"I guess you better go on back there and get through with it," Texas suggested.

"Well, I reckon I will," Smith returned.

The barber was out from under the table, quite life-size and natural to behold, when Smith passed out of the door. As the sound of his feet ceased across the office floor, telling that he had gone on his way to resume his unfinished business of looking around down in the Nation, Mr. Noggle laughed. It was a high-keyed, quavering sort of a hen laugh that did not add a thing to the figure he had made of himself throughout the affair.

Mrs. Goodloe was the first to reach Texas. She caught him as he was retreating modestly after Smith, and patted him on the back, and drew him into the room again, and called him "honey." The

minister was next, and then the whole crowd came spilling over him, with chicken on their hands, slapping him on his new coat, and confusing him so that his face was as red as if he had been taken sneaking the barber's ring from the finger of the bride.

They wouldn't allow him to go; he had to sit right down there at the table and have some supper, which was going to go so merrily now for his timely interference with the murderous intentions of Zebedee Smith. There was another pot of coffee in the kitchen, Mrs. Goodloe said, and she went off to fetch it, and the preacher's wife took the broom from Malvina when she would have swept up the grounds from the floor, and swept them up herself, and everybody laughed, and the color came back to Malvina's face.

The solemn declaration of Texas that he had dined, and that he could not make room for another bite, was laughed down. The minister's wife made a place for him beside herself, and he was obliged to take it, for he was too timid and gentle, too lacking in the subtleties of polished society to hurt the feelings of anybody, even anybody as unworthy as the groom.

And when Malvina cut the cake, the first piece of it went to Texas, and when he took it she gave him a look that the minister, sitting at her right

hand around the corner of the table, read as plainly as he ever read a book in his life. It was a look that said she would give her new husband, and the green hotel, and all that she possessed in this world and once held dear, for a man like the tall, lank stranger, with the straight dark locks of hair on his sun-brown temples.

Mrs. Majors, the preacher's wife, was an athletic young woman who wore no stays. She moved about with a swinging motion to her body above the hips very suggestive of combativeness, and Texas wondered whether the Rev. Mr. Majors might not have a pretty warm time of it now and then. She had scanty light hair, which she twisted up into the Psyche knot, just at that time becoming again popular with the ladies who followed the styles. Her forehead was lofty, and clear of the bangs such as Malvina and the other young ladies wore. Bangs were becoming *passé* as far west as Topeka. Mrs. Majors had anticipated the arrival of the edict in Cottonwood.

The minister had not recognized Texas in his black coat as the man who had won first prize in the men's roping contest at the fair that afternoon, and nobody at the table connected him with the spectacular bit of gunnery in the street that had set the whole town talking about the new gun-slinger who had come to join Cottonwood's notables

in that line. Only Mrs. Goodloe had a possible clue to it, and it had slipped her mind in the excitement of getting rid of Smith. It did not occur to her again that this was Uncle Boley Drumgoole's friend until the minister's wife asked him where he was from, when he arrived, and how long he expected to remain.

Mrs. Goodloe pulled the puckering string to her short upper lip and prepared her face for speech, but Texas had informed the minister's wife that he came from Texas, and that he expected to stay around in that part of the country a right smart spell before she was ready to put in a word.

"Why, you must be the gentleman that won the ropin'?" she said.

Texas admitted that he was, and the minister put down his napkin and leaned over to look round his wife and stare at Texas with his mouth open, amazement in his eyes.

"Why, you're the man that horsewhipped the mayor and shot Budd Dalton through the arm!"

The minister pushed back his chair, came round and shook hands with Texas, very energetically, very warmly. The groom rose in the length of his legs, red to the eyes in the pleasure of such a distinguished guest and champion. The others pressed round to shake hands and look Texas over with new interest and respect, for the bride's cake

was eaten down to crumbs, and it was time for the party to leave the table.

So the very reluctant Texas found himself the center of a soirée, with husky professional men—the foreman of the railroad roundhouse was one of them—slamming his shoulder-blades, and smiling young ladies coming up and giving him timid hands, and Mrs. Goodloe showing teeth like a walrus. It was a whirl and a babble, with the dark mark of the coffee on the floor, innocent stain of the conflict with the forces of Smith, routed and dispersed forever from the threshold of the green hotel.

The initiation of Texas into the polite and respectable society of Cottonwood was at this point when a man appeared in the door through which Zebedee Smith had so lately passed to resume his reconnoiter in the Nation. He stood there with his hat in his hand, a strong perfume of violets coming from him, a fluff of white handkerchief showing most elegantly from the breast-pocket of his almost sky-blue coat.

In spite of his elegance, Texas recognized him as Dee Winch, the bow-legged man who had taken such an effective hand in his behalf when the crowd rushed him at the fair. Mrs. Goodloe went beaming over to him, her hand out in welcome.

"Well, you're a purty-lookin' feller, ain't you—

comin' in after it's all over and everything's gone!"

"I'm very sorry, mom, but I had some business on hand that come up unexpected."

"I know you'd 'a' come, Dee, if you could," she said seriously, as if she knew very well that Dee Winch was a man of his word and was tender on the point of it. And so the others went to shake hands with him, the groom high among them, like a camel, and Malvina came bearing a piece of cake on a plate, smiling like an open fire.

"I saved a piece for you, Dee; I knew you'd come," she said.

Dee Winch took the cake and tasted it, and vowed it was the best he ever had put into his mouth, and said there wasn't a bit of use asking who made it, for it was sweet with a delicacy that only one hand in the world could give it. And the men laughed and whacked Dee on the shoulder-blades, and the ladies said, "Oh, hursh!" and poked Malvina in the side, causing her to turn red and giggle outrageously, for she was a ticklish lady, and couldn't a-bear to be touched under the arms.

Dee Winch shook hands with the bride and groom again, ceremoniously, with gravity, and wished them joy. He told the groom that he was the luckiest man in Cottonwood, and that he'd rather be in his place than the President's. Then the minister brought Texas Hartwell forward and

presented him to the late-coming guest formally, and the two of them stood a moment with clasped hands, looking into each other's eyes.

Hartwell saw that Dee Winch's eyes were gray, and that there was a shadow in them as of a sorrow, or the pain of an affliction that he had kept hidden from the knowledge of men. The young man's own dark eyes kindled to express the appreciation of one with so much apparent worth in him as little bow-legged Dee Winch.

"I met you this afternoon, sir, and I'm under great obligation to you," Texas said.

"It's the other way," Winch assured him. "We're all under obligation to you, a stranger, for doing what none of us here ever took in hand to do."

"It wasn't because of a lack of men to do it, sir, but for want of an opportunity," Texas returned.

Mrs. Goodloe cut off further compliments at this point by announcing that the guests would retire to the parlor, where Viney Kelly was going to sing, and Viney Kelly herself took possession of Dee Winch, with the request that he turn her music for her.

Miss Kelly was a lady of sentimental appearance, thin, as the general run of people in that country appeared to be. Her face was long, her cheeks meager, her mouth large and flexible. She took

her seat at the organ with much disposing of the skirt and flattening of the music-sheets, making much of her opportunity, flouncing herself into the notice of everybody before she struck a note. Miss Kelly was not of the school that wastes its talents on barren air.

Dee Winch took up his stand at the end of the organ on Miss Kelly's right hand, as vigilant as if he waited to draw his deadly gun on some expected foe. His hand was over the little music-rack—made in representation of the classic lyre—ready to flip the page the second that Viney came to the last word.

It was not a very enlivening melody for a wedding that Viney began to draw from the little brown instrument. When she came to the words it seemed to Texas to be almost tragically inappropriate. It concerned a lady who loved a gentleman, and was present at his nuptials with another, and the chorus of it, which came with depressing frequency, was:

"I'll be all smiles to-ni-i-i-ight,
I'll be all smiles to-night;
Though my heart should break to-mor-r-ow,
I'll be all smiles to-night."

Viney sang it with great feeling, weaving gently from side to side in rhythm with the tune. Texas

wondered if her heart had been set on the barber, and if this could be her lament and renunciation. But whatever sentiment might have inspired the selection, she followed it unwaveringly to the end, where:

> "And then the room he en-tered,
> The bride up-on his ar-r-m—"

and her heart—the composer's, not Miss Viney's—broke right on the spot, without being able to put it off until dawn.

They applauded Miss Viney with hearty hands. If anybody besides Texas was struck by the humorous inaptitude of the selection it was not the bridegroom, indeed. He was loudest of the loud in his clamor for more, and he turned to Texas as Miss Viney swung round on the stool and began the prelude to another tune.

"That's what I call *music,*" said he.

Texas nodded. Mr. Noggle leaned over, coming so close to Texas that the perfume on his hair was almost overwhelming.

"Whan she throws that mouth of hern wide open you can see her appetite," he said, "but she can sing to a fare-you-well!"

Texas was tired, for he had taken the road before dawn of that eventful and long-drawn day.

Now he saw Mrs. Majors casting eyes at him again, and he feared that she was about to assail him with more questions on his origin and future intentions. While he had nothing to conceal, he did not feel that a man should tell all that he knew at once, so he withdrew to the office while Miss Viney was sighing through the last stanza of " 'Tis a Flower from My Angel Mother's Grave."

Dee Winch escaped during the applause, also, and came out on his toes, sweating like he'd undergone an examination for a civil-service job.

"I like music," he said softly, with a cautious look back over his shoulder, "but I like it off a little piece."

"Yes, sir, there's kinds of music that a man ought to pay for, and—other kinds," Texas allowed.

"Yes," said Winch, looking carefully around the office, "it's like the sign of a Mexican dentist I saw in San Antone one time. 'Teeth pulled without pain, one dollar; with pain, fifty cents.' The pleasanter it is, the more a man ought to be willing to pay. I met Uncle Boley Drumgoole as I was comin' over here. He was tellin' me you thought some of trail-ridin'?"

"I've got to find a job of some kind. I thought I'd try for trail-ridin'."

"Well, I've been hirin' myself out to the associa-

tion for that same kind of a job—that's what made me late to this blowout. I've just come from a session with old man Duncan."

"I aimed to see him in the morning. Do you reckon it would be any use?"

"I was goin' to say that they've put me in as a sort of a boss rider, and I'll be more than glad to give you a job if you'll take it."

"I sure am obliged to you, sir, and I'd snap it up in a minute if I had a horse."

"I've got that all fixed. Be ready to start in the morning—I'll ride around here after you. Headquarters is at Duncan's ranch, about twenty miles south. I think maybe you'll have to wait around there a day or two till I can line them other fellers out and drop them I don't want."

Winch went back to the parlor and excused himself, and gave the bride and groom a little jocular advice to leave things merry after him.

"Well, so-long till morning, Texas," he said as he came out through the office. He shook hands with a quick and sincere clasp and passed out into the street.

Texas stood in the door looking after him, pondering over the many sides that he had glimpsed in this remarkable little man. One peculiar thing he had noted of Winch, and that was his ceaseless watchfulness. No matter where he stood, or

whether he was serious or gay, he never appeared to be entirely relaxed. Always there was the tension of the man who waits, listens, feels with all his faculties, for something unexpected and unannounced. It was as if he listened for a step behind him, or expected a touch on the shoulder, or a whisper in his ear.

That shadow in his eyes was growing out of his constant strain, Texas knew. It must be a heavy thing to go carrying the responsibility for sending so many men out of this life's activities as Winch had dismissed, he thought. There must be a good many ghosts behind a man who was accountable for the lives of nineteen men, ghosts of accusation, doubt; of speculation, of unrest, and perhaps remorse.

He was glad that matters had turned out so fortunately for him in his encounter before Uncle Boley's door. If that old pistol of Ed McCoy's had been the breadth of a hair less true there might have been human life against his peace that night. The thought of it started a sweat on his forehead. He prayed deep from his soul that he might never become a listening man like Dee Winch, straining and restless, with the unheard step of a feared retribution behind him, the memory of dead men's faces clouding his eyes with shadows.

CHAPTER VIII

INTERLUDE

DUNCAN'S ranch-house was a large T-shaped building, constructed, like nearly all the ranch-houses of that country, of the tenacious prairie sod. It stood on the bank of a weak, shallow stream, and there were cottonwood trees around it, making a cool and pleasant harbor to reach in the middle of a thirsty day, after a ride that grew more desolate and barren as the traveler proceeded southward from Cottonwood.

Texas and Winch had not made a forced ride of it; therefore it was almost noon when they turned their horses into the spacious corral with the little creek cutting across its corner. With the thrift of his Scottish kind Duncan had fenced off land in a little pocket of the creek bottom back of his house, and planted a garden there. Very green and hopeful it looked to the eyes of the two men, and so strange a sight in that land, undisturbed by the plow, that they stood at the fence to admire it.

Mrs. Duncan came to the door and hailed them, the two Misses Duncan showing blonde heads over her shoulders. So the two men turned from the

vegetables in Malcolm Duncan's garden to the flowers within his house, where Mrs. Duncan greeted Winch by his first name with the familiarity of an old friend, and shook hands like a man with Texas Hartwell, and presented her daughters.

"Malcolm home?" Winch inquired.

"No. Him and the girls got home about midnight from the fair, and he was in the saddle at daylight this morning to see how things is goin' with the boys."

Mrs. Duncan spoke with the twang of Indiana on her tongue. She was a lady of large girth, with a red wrapper and a red face. Outwardly and inwardly she appeared to be exceedingly hot. Her daughters gave no promise of following the maternal lines. They were straight-backed and tall, rather handsome, and cool as daisies in the field in their white dresses. To Texas they appeared out of place in that island of a home in the great raw sweep of prairie, for they carried themselves as if they had been accustomed to meeting people all their lives.

They recognized Texas as the man who had won first place in the roping contest, and spoke of his work with compliments. Texas felt like a rooster with his tail feathers plucked, he admitted to himself, when it came to sitting down to dinner with those young ladies in his shirt-sleeves. But there

was no help for it. The long-tailed coat was in Cottonwood, in the keeping of Mrs. Goodloe at the Woodbine Hotel, and it might be many a long day, he thought, before it would grace his back again.

"We've been lookin' all morning for Sallie McCoy and her mother," Mrs. Duncan said. "They promised the girls they'd come over to-day, but I guess they didn't get an early start."

"They used to be neighbors of ours," the Miss Duncan near Texas explained, nodding her pretty, fair head to indicate the location in a general way. "Their ranch was down the creek about seven or eight or nine miles."

"Yes, it was ten or 'leven or twelve," said her mother, laughing over the indirect description. "A body never would get anywheres if they had to go by you tellin' 'em the road, Naomi. Them girls" —to Texas—"has been away to school back in Lawrence so long they've plumb got out of the ways of this country."

"They sure speak well for the schools of Lawrence, anyway, ma'am."

Texas spoke with such forceful warmth that the simple compliment seemed something altogether grand.

"Why, mother, we've been coming home for three months every summer," the other one protested, as

if hurt by the implication that they were strangers in their own land.

Mrs. Duncan sighed, and said she knew it as well as they did, she guessed, but it didn't seem like they came home oftener than once every five years. Then she went on to tell Texas about her boys, five of them, all big enough to count as men in the work of the range, and that the other girl's name was Ruth, and that she was two years older than Naomi, and that Naomi would be eighteen her next birthday. All of which intimate information—for what can be more intimate among all a lady's secrets than her age—did not appear to disconcert the girls in the least.

Dee Winch did not say much, but there was a sufficiency in what he did say which gave one the feeling that he had said considerable. Texas answered Mrs. Duncan's ramifications from her original subject into an inquiry into his life, adventures, family, and prospects with a shyness of manner and softness in his words that caused the young ladies to lean and listen when he spoke.

He told her as much about himself as he had told the minister's wife, and short cuts and sharp turns could not draw from him anything more. It seemed a simple story for a man who had come to Cottonwood like a whirlwind and made himself a

figure in it to such an extent as he had done. Maybe she believed it, maybe she did not.

Winch was off about his new duties immediately after dinner, with a word to Texas that he would return in a day or two and assign him to his post. He took nothing at all to eat but a package of dried beef, and dried beef of the range days was not the tender delicacy of this packing-house age. It was *dried,* and it required confidence to approach it, teeth to chew it, and a stomach equal to a corn sheller to do the rest. Texas wondered if pulling on dried beef had given Winch's teeth the peculiar outward slant that he had noticed when he saw him first. He believed that it was equal to it, anyhow.

Sallie McCoy came riding to the ranch alone along toward evening. Her mother had not felt equal to making the trip in the sun, Texas heard her explaining from where he sat on a bench under a cottonwood reading the poems of Robert Burns. He closed the book, moved more by the living poetry of Sallie McCoy's eyes than the written word, and went forward to take her horse.

She appeared taller afoot than in the saddle, still not too tall for a man whose heart was the proper distance from the ground. And there was something in her way of putting down her feet when she walked, something in the grace of her body and the

soft charm of her voice, that told him she was not of common stock.

Blood may wander far, and lodge like blown seed in strange places, but it will set its mark as unfailingly in the wilderness as in the palace. Blood had set its mark in this girl's face, in the true modeling of her body, slender and strong. Somewhere in the race of McCoys there had been a hero, near or far.

Texas thought her shy when Mrs. Duncan introduced them, yet there was something in her eyes which seemed to be for him alone, a struggling expression, he felt it to be, for what convention could not allow from lips. It was gratitude, with something softer which eluded him like a swift bird, and tingled him to the toes. Texas put his arm round the neck of the little cow pony that had stood him in such friendly service the day before, and stroked its nose.

"I'm under great obligations to you for lendin' this horse to me yesterday, Miss McCoy. I didn't have any chance to thank you then, for I didn't know till after he carried me to victory whose horse he was—Uncle Boley didn't tell me. I want to thank you now, and pay inter-est on it."

"If you ever owed me even thanks, it is paid, Mr. Hartwell," she told him with great seriousness.

"The debt and the interest are on the other side."

Hearing them talk so right at the beginning, and knowing the history of the encounter between Texas and the mayor, and the subsequent attempt to kill Hartwell in the street, the Duncans looked on him as Sallie's personal champion. It was doubtless out of this feeling that he belonged peculiarly to Sallie that the Misses Duncan found a great deal to do in the kitchen, although Mrs. Duncan's broad back was left ordinarily to bear such tasks alone, after the ways of daughters the world across.

They were very well acquainted by the time supper was ready, old friends when it was over, and the Misses Duncan were clattering the dishes off. The girls were in a flutter now to have things out of the way, for more company was coming, young men, to be sure, from the ranch above.

A young man was a young man in that country then, no matter what his occupation or whence he came, but these two proved to be exceptions to whom advantages had been given, just as Duncan and his wife, and the Kansas pioneers more than the pioneers of any place in the nation, had made sacrifices to outfit their children for a higher plane. They were the sons of a rancher, and they had been at Lawrence attending the university, also. They were rather boisterous, and unduly familiar in their way of addressing young ladies, Miss McCoy

included, by their first names. So it seemed to Texas, at least, his culture being of another kind.

There was a good deal of singing, between the Duncan girls and the young men, with loud accompaniment on the large hoarse piano which, Texas understood, was a historic instrument, and a notable one, in that section. Texas could not see much improvement over Viney Kelly's efforts to entertain in the roistering tunes which the young men shouted, with the bits of sentimental embroidery contributed by Ruth and Naomi. He didn't take a deep interest in it, although he tried to appear greatly entertained, for many things came drifting into his mind calling for serious consideration. Sallie had hung back out of it on the plea that she did not know the new songs. She would not approach the piano, in spite of their entreaties and light banter.

"And you the only one in the crowd that can really sing—unless it's Mr. Hartwell?" Naomi said.

Texas was quick to assure her that he could not lift a note. But his mind leaped back from following the trend of graver things to the pleasant conjecture of what kind of a song Sallie McCoy would select if she should sing. As for her voice, he felt that he knew how it would sound, felt that he had heard it many a time before, indeed. There came over him suddenly a longing for its satisfying

cadence, as for something known in happier times, denied through hardship and lonely days.

But he would not ask her to sing, feeling that her heart would not be in it. The others were beginning it all over again when Malcolm Duncan came home. Texas was thankful that greetings made it necessary to suspend the din.

Duncan was a splendid figure of manhood, tall and rugged, with the health of his clean life in his eyes. His broad forehead and short gray beard gave him an appearance more suited to a chair in a university than a seat in the saddle. It was plain where the girls got their comeliness.

The Duncan girls took their strong-lunged admirers out to gabble under the moon while the master of the house had his supper, leaving Texas and Sallie to follow, pairing off as ingeniously as birds. Sallie lingered a little behind the others, answering Duncan's inquiries about her mother, and whether she had brought him the Kansas City paper. Texas waited in the hall-like passage between the two sections of the house, where a bracket-lamp shone over the saddles and guns which hung along the wall.

"I *thought* I knew that belt," said Sallie, stopping where Texas had hung his gun. "I wonder how it came here?"

"It's mine—Uncle Boley gave it to me," he ex-

plained. "He told me it was carried once by the best man he ever knew."

"It was father's gun," she said softly. She had taken it down, and stood now looking at the heavy gear with her head bowed over it. Texas saw a tear fall on the chafed leather. He put out his hand as if to comfort or assure her.

"I hope I'll always be worthy of it, Miss McCoy."

"I'm sure you will," she said, in simple sincerity. "Did you have it—was this the gun you—" She faltered over the thing she wanted him to understand.

"I owe my life to it already," he said, with gratitude almost reverential.

"I didn't see Uncle Boley before I left; I didn't know. I'm glad he gave it to you; I'm glad you had it when that gang—" She lifted the holster to her lips, as if moved by a sudden emotion, and kissed the stock of the great black gun. She gave it to him then, her head thrown high, her eyes bright in the dim lamplight for the tears that hung in them unspilled.

The others were out by the gate, filling the night with laughter.

"Let's sit here," Sallie suggested, stopping where the moonlight came sowing down through the cottonwood upon a bench.

Youth was with them, also, but laughter seemed to have gone its way out of their hearts that night. Not much was said between them as they sat there, for the thoughts of each were busy as weaving spiders working to stretch their nets before the dawn. But in a quarter of an hour of such half-silent communion much good or much hurt may come to a pair of young hearts all open for the writing of the Great Adventure.

When Duncan appeared in the door with his pipe and called to Sallie, they started like children out of sleep.

"Come in and sing me my song, Sallie," he requested.

She laughed a soft little protest, but rose at once.

"It sounds better from a distance, the greater the distance the better," she said, putting out her hand to stop Texas when he would have gone with her. "He never wants but that one song—*his* song, he always calls it. I'll come back when the agony is over."

Presently the prelude to the sweet old melody came to Texas where he waited beneath the cottonwood, his heart almost over at the window, it seemed to him, straining lest he lose one chord. The words of the song came softly:

"Ever of thee I'm fondly dreaming,
Thy gentle voice my spirit can cheer;

Thou art the star that mildly beaming
Shone on my path when all was dark and drear."

Texas stood up, as if he were in church. He closed his eyes and listened, and it seemed that tears were burning behind the lids, and that all the tender recollections of his life were coming back to him. Her voice was so soft, so clear in the rising notes, so appealing in the tender tribute of the heart disinherited of its love. He felt that a lonely man must have written that song, and that only a pure woman could make the rest of the indifferent world understand how deep his sincerity had been, how sweetly pathetic his constancy.

He did not know whether he breathed at all until she came to the end, and Malcolm Duncan clapped his great hands, and praised her in his great voice. But when she returned to him in the shadow of the cottonwood Texas took her hands and held them a moment in the grateful expression for which his heart could find no words.

"I'd travel many a day to hear you sing that song again, Miss McCoy," he said, his act of taking her hands so sincerely a gallant, and at once grateful, expression of his emotions that a girl more prudish than Sallie McCoy could not have taken offense. She was fine enough to feel the unusual beauty of his compliment, and thanked him for it, with no pretense of concealing her pleasure.

Texas went to make his bed in the haymow with the sound of dove's notes in his ears. When he should have been asleep, repairing himself against to-morrow's work, he lay speculating on what had passed that night, marveling over the additions one day can put to the long sum of a man's experiences. For above all the experiences of his life thus far, this meeting and knowing Sallie McCoy was by far the most marvelous and beautiful.

It was a refreshing interlude in the adventures of violence which had been his lot in that strange country, and it was too rare, no doubt, to come into his days again. In the morning, very likely, Dee Winch would come for him, and he would go away to ride the border trails.

That was not a situation that could last long, nor one in which he should care to continue. In a month or two, perhaps, he would be following the wavering trail of his fortunes into some other place, and Sallie McCoy would be behind him, among the dear things of this world which his hand never could hope to reach. She was not for a footless man like him, and there was nothing on the horizon to promise the speedy mending of his condition. He must ride on, and forget, or, if not quite forget, think of returning only in dreams.

He put his hand on the weapon that had been her father's, feeling a new comradeship for it.

Why had she kissed it with such deep emotion, and given it into his hand with such high pride? Surely not because of anything that it had done for him. The fact that it had saved his life could be nothing to her. She had caressed it for the sake of its old association. What might have been a bond between them under happier circumstances could only be a dear memento now, for a man of honor could not think of a maiden when he did not even own the horse that he rode.

CHAPTER IX

FORBIDDEN TERRITORY

THE plan of patrolling the border against Texas cattle was at once simple and effective. Without any warrant of law for their measures of defense against the contagion of their herds, the Kansas drovers had established certain defined routes by which cattle from the Texas range could be driven to the railroad loading points within the confines of their state. For a hundred miles or more along the northern line of Indian Territory the trail-riders, of whom Texas Hartwell had become one, rode watching for the approach of Texas herds, to turn them aside from the forbidden land.

As Uncle Boley had explained to Hartwell, the ravages of Texas fever on the Kansas range had worked tremendous losses within the past few years. Proposed laws establishing a quarantine line against southern stock were before Congress, and they were passed in time, but not until the Texas drovers had spent every energy to prevent it.

True, the routes fixed by the Kansas cattlemen were through the most arid part of the State, where

water was scarce sometimes in the summer months, and the grazing poor. The Kansas range always has been the fattening place for Texas range cattle, for there is no grass that equals Kansas grass. The plan of Texas drovers had been to drive immense herds into that rich country, graze them slowly toward the railroad, fattening them as they walked leisurely to market. But they dropped millions of fever ticks as they went along, and the bite of one of these tiny creatures was death to a northern animal.

So they were to be kept out at all costs, even the cost of battle and the penalty of death. The trail-riders had been keeping the Texans to the prescribed routes, but there was a spirit of defiance growing below the quarantine line which indicated trouble of serious proportions. For that reason the border guards had been doubled.

A man had to come highly recommended to get a job as trail-rider. It called for courage, and a good head in an emergency, ceaseless vigilance, trustworthiness beyond a doubt. It was the highest compliment that the hardy men of that country could pay Texas Hartwell when they made him a member of that trusted band. He might have fought a score of battles in the streets of Cottonwood and come out victor in every one of them, never to draw any recognition of his capabilities

with a gun from them. But when he lifted his voice and hand in defense of the rights of a clansman's daughter, that was enough to pass him into the iron circle of their highest confidence.

Texas did not realize this, for he was altogether too ingenuous to suspect that a community should reward a man for discharging a gentleman's obligations. He thought that Winch had hired him because he had proved himself handy with a gun against odds, or as a personal appreciation of the thrashing he had given the mayor.

In the two weeks that he had been riding trail, nothing had happened to break the autumnal peace. At morning he met at one end of his beat the man beyond him, and at evening the man from the other side. He was responsible only for the territory that he covered, a front of not more than ten or a dozen miles. Often a wave of the hand from a hilltop to tell that all was well was the only interchange between him and his comrades of the trail for days together.

Thus the time passed in monotonous loneliness, nothing to break it except now and then some traveler in covered wagon on his way from Kansas to Texas with his family, or somebody who had tried the lure of the South and was returning, thinner of shank and more tattered and roped together than when he left.

The marvelous and cheering thing about it was that he never met one of these travelers, no matter which way he was headed, who was poor in hope. In the faces of all the ragged drivers there was something like the reflection of a far-away light, in their eyes the brilliant eagerness of souls upon an endless quest. If they had missed it in Kansas they were going to hit it in Texas; if Texas had failed of the bright promise, surely back in Kansas where the grass grew they would come into their own.

So the surprise of hearing a human voice, and a woman's voice at that, raised in song in the dusk of a certain evening as he rode his way, was almost startling to Texas. The singer was riding ahead of him, not in sight, and this was her song:

"O-o-o, the roof was copper-bottomed
And the chimney solid gold,
On the double-breasted mansion on the square;
But I lost a lot at keno,
And I'll never more behold
The double-breasted mansion on the square."

Texas hurried on to overtake her, wondering why she should be riding in the same direction as he instead of across his trail. East and west travelers along the line of the Nation, as that part of Indian Territory inhabited by the Cherokees was

commonly called, were rare, and nobody but cowboys was ever heard to go along singing in that land. She heard him coming, and reined up on a knoll, where she stood quite clear against the last light of the west.

"Hello!" she hailed, while he was still a hundred yards away. "Oh, it's you Mr. Texas?" she said, surprise and relief mingling in her tone.

"It most surely is," said he, his wonder enlarging to discover that she was Fannie Goodnight, the girl who had saved him from the humiliation of arrest by her interference with the mayor. "I wonder what in the name of time brought you away down here into this lonesome country, Miss?"

"I guess I'm lost, Texas," she said, with a short little laugh.

He looked at her queerly, but could not make much out of her face, for it was growing dark. But he noted that she was not wearing the elegant green costume on this unaccountable excursion, miles away from any human abode. Her dress was of some dark material; she wore a handkerchief round her neck in the cowboy style.

"It's funny for you to be singin' along that way and you lost," he said, more in the manner of speculation than address.

"Oh, I wasn't worried; I knew I'd come out *somewhere,* and I've got a sack of grub. I've been

at Colby's ranch down in the Nation—you know where it is?"

"No, ma'am, I don't."

"It's twenty-five or thirty miles below the line. Colby married my cousin. She's part Indian, so am I."

"You don't tell me!"

"I guess that's why I wasn't worried when I lost the trail and got kind of turned around down there in the hills."

"Where were you headin' for, Miss?"

"Cottonwood."

"It's close on to sixty miles from here, due north. You was headin' east."

"Well, I knew I'd come out *somewhere*."

"Yes, I guess you would."

He didn't believe her, unsuspecting as his nature was. There was nothing at all uncommon in a woman of the range country undertaking a ride like that, through a section where there was little danger to be met, but a woman whom her relatives would trust to such an undertaking would not be the one to ride east when her road lay to the north. She interrupted his perplexing thought.

"Is there any water around here? I'm dying for a drink."

"There's a spring branch along a couple of miles. I was aimin' to camp there to-night."

"Do you mind if I stop there with you and cook my supper? When the moon comes up I'll ride on."

"I was just goin' to ask you to take a sup of coffee with me. But I'm afraid there won't be any moon to-night, miss; it looks like it might cloud up and rain."

"If it does I'll have to wait till daylight. Well, I've got my slicker."

"You provide yourself like a regular old-timer when you stir around."

"I am an old-timer, I used to ride after cattle down at Colby's. That's where I learnt to rope."

"You're mighty neat and handy at it, miss."

Texas felt that this compliment was due her, despite the underhanded scheme to defraud Sallie McCoy and the public in which she had borne a part. Some way he felt that she had been more of an instrument than a designer in that shameful steal. Perhaps this softening toward her came from the service she had rendered before Uncle Boley's door that evening the mayor had ordered his arrest.

"I'm not as good with a rope as I used to be, Texas," she said. But for all this modest disclaimer he could see that she was pleased by this compliment.

But what was she doing there? That was what

troubled Texas for an answer as he rode beside her toward the stream. For a woman who had lost her way she was mightily composed and easy of mind. Perhaps that was her nature, having been around so much, and accustomed to meeting all kinds of people. It was the way, also, of one used to the life she said she had followed once. Yet he knew very well that anybody who had ridden after cattle on the range never would get turned around and drop the road in the broad of day.

It was her own business, he concluded. If a woman wanted to go roaming around that way, let her go. This was a bold woman, with a large experience among men, larger indeed, he feared, than had been good for her. She would take care of herself in her own way, no matter where she might make her bed. But she had no honest purpose there on the border. Texas was forced to admit that belief in spite of the promptings of gratitude.

Texas gathered dry sumac for the fire, and that was as far as Fannie would allow him to go in the supper preparations. If he had doubted before that she ever had lived a cowboy's life all misgivings were dispelled at sight of her deftness with frying-pan over the little fire. She belonged to the craft; the slightest doubt of that was a slander. Of course, she couldn't ride and throw a rope to com-

pare with Sallie McCoy, but he knew that she could have done better than she did with that old trained steer.

She sat cross-legged like an Arab beside the fire, her hat on the ground, the light in her beautiful black hair, strong on the white and pink of her handsome bold face, turning the flapjacks with a flip of the pan, flashing them up like fish leaping in the sun. He stood by admiring her, for she compelled that as her due, no matter what secrets her heart carried, no matter what her adventures had been.

"Texas?" she said, not turning her eyes from her task.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Call me Fannie: they all do. Texas, where did you come from?"

"Kansas City, most recently, Miss Fannie."

"Oh, I mean *where* did you come from—where did you start? Here"—offering a tin plate of cakes and bacon—"sit down and begin your supper, and tell me about yourself. If you've got anything to hide, skip it. I'm pretty good on the guess."

"There isn't anything in particular to hide, Fannie," said he, thoughtfully, putting his hat down beside him as if he prepared for a ceremony. "I started in Taixas, and I come to the end of my

rope in Kansas City. Father had a ranch down on the Nueces, and we got smart and begun to drive cattle up to Dakota to supply the government. They butchered them for the Sioux, you know."

"And you drove one time too many, I guess, didn't you, Texas?"

Texas twisted his head in combination of assent and expression of seriousness as he reached for another cake.

"You sure are good on the guess, too, Miss Fannie."

"Fannie," she corrected, with gentle firmness.

"Fannie," he repeated, like a dutiful boy.

"Go ahead, Texas; tell me about it."

"The last trip we drove in ten thousand. The Indians met us on the way and butchered them for themselves. But we got out of it right happily, you might say."

"Did they shoot you up any, Texas?"

"Not to amount to much, Fannie."

"*How* much, Texas?"

"Oh, three or four times, here and there."

"Three *or* four—which was it, Texas?"

"Four, Fannie."

Fannie appeared to be thinking the situation over. She sat with her head bent toward the fire a little to keep the glare out of her eyes, and turned out two or three cakes before she spoke again.

"I guess the government paid you for the cattle. What did you do with the money?"

"The government never paid a dollar. I hope to get it some time, if I live long enough to see a bill through Congress."

"Well, what become of the ranch?"

"We sold it and invested in real estate in Kansas City, on the advice of people we thought to be friends."

"Of *course* they skinned you."

"The Sioux Indians are gentlemen, Fannie, compared to them sharks back there."

"They rob you without any false pretenses," she nodded.

"Yes, you know who's cleaned you out when they ride off."

"So you left your father up there and struck out to make another stake, did you, Texas?"

Texas did not answer right away. He turned his head and looked off toward the south quite a spell, as if he considered this impertinence, and going into things a little too far.

"I took him back to the old place to bury him, Fannie," he said, simply, but with such pathos that it sounded like the cry of an empty heart.

She poured herself a cup of coffee, keeping her head turned so the light would not fall on her face. Her voice was low and soft when she spoke again.

"Your mother and the rest of them are still in Kansas City?"

"Mother went many years before him. My married sister lives in El Paso. And so you know all about me now, Miss Fannie, from the cradle to Kansas."

She rolled a piece of bacon in a pancake and ate it like a banana.

"You're a Texas cowman, ridin' trail for the association," she said. "What would you do, Texas, if somebody you knew from down there was to come drivin' a big herd up here and wanted you to let 'em through the quarantine line?"

"It isn't likely, Fannie, that anybody I know ever will come here doin' that."

"Well, if somebody you didn't know was to come from Texas and ask you to let them slip through this gap in the line you watch?"

"You oughtn't to ask me that, Miss Fannie."

She looked at him steadily a moment, reached out, touched his arm.

"No, I oughtn't. I know what you'd do without askin'. You'd fight till you had to prop your eyes open—you'd die before you'd let them through."

Texas seemed to be very much embarrassed by this expression of confidence. He looked round at the skies, his head tilted back as if he listened.

"It sure is goin' to rain, Fannie," he said.

"Texas"—her hand was on his arm again—"I'm not lost. I know right where I am, I know every inch of this country. I could go to Cottonwood as straight as a bullet."

"Yes, I suspected you could, Fannie."

"Texas"—earnestly, leaning toward him a little, the firelight in her bright eyes, her voice low—"there's a big herd of Texas cattle not three miles from here, and they're goin' to drive through tonight!"

He looked at her sharply, startled a little at first by the earnestness of her voice, but recovered himself almost immediately. He smiled as he threw a few small sticks on the fire to make a light.

"Did you come down to tell me?" he asked, treating it as if he considered it a joke.

"Tell you! That gang made me come—I was to hold you here, right here by this creek, till morning, so they wouldn't run into you. Tell you, hell!"

Texas was on his feet in a flash. There was no doubting the earnestness of her word, although he doubted whether she had given him the full truth of the scheme. She was beside him, looking appealingly into his eyes.

"Where are they, do you know?" he asked.

"I expect they're drivin' across by now, west of

here, just far enough away to be out of hearing. There'll be somebody—"

He started for his horse, hobbled near by. Fannie stopped him, her hand on his shoulder.

"They'll kill me if they find out I told you, but I couldn't double-cross you, Texas. I like you, kid —you're *clean*—you're the kind of a man I'd go through hell for, clear up to the neck!"

He took her hand, with a swift look into her eyes.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you've done, Fannie, nor how much I'm honored by your confidence. Hurry—get your horse! If you'll start right now you can—"

"Listen!" she whispered, her voice choked with fear.

Texas had heard the slight movement beyond the small circle of their little fire, and had sprung away from her, his hand on his gun.

"Run for your horse!" he called to her, in alarm.

She stood hesitant, the light of the fire on her face, her eyes great, fear in every feature.

"They heard me—they'll kill me!"

CHAPTER X

A VOICE TO REMEMBER

A REATA swished out of the dark as Fannie spoke. It caught Texas before he could draw his gun. She saw him jerked off his feet, the rope binding his arms at his sides.

In the struggle that he made to free himself, his captors dragged him across the little fire, scattering the light sticks, out of which the blaze died almost at once. Many hands laid hold of him; the rawhide lariat was wound around his legs and arms, binding him like a mummy. They threw him down, and cursed him for his fight.

A man with a whang in his voice like the high notes of a banjo was talking to Fannie over beyond the scattered brands of fire. He was railing at her, calling her unspeakable names, abusing her for her betrayal.

"No, you don't leave here—no, you don't!" he said, in answer to something that Texas could not hear. "You wouldn't double-cross him, wouldn't you? Well, you're not goin' to double-cross us again, neither. You'll go with us, and you'll stay with us till you see this thing out!"

"Yes, and if you hurt a hair of his head I'll put a bullet between your eyes if it takes me forty years!" she told him. "I did double-cross you, and I'm glad of it, and I'd do it—"

He drowned her in a volley of abuse, yelled an order to somebody, and Fannie was taken away, protesting and defying as she went. The man who had cursed her came and bent over Texas, trying his bonds from shoulders to ankles, tightening them here and there, saying nothing.

Texas was so securely tied that he could move nothing but his fingers. For a little while the fellow stood looking down at him, as if he considered some additional precaution.

"It's purty tough medicine, Bud, but you'll have to stand it," he said.

"You might loosen the slip-knot around my arms a little if you're aimin' to leave me here, pardner. It's cuttin' off the blood from my hands. I'll be paralyzed."

The man laughed. "You're too damn handy with 'em anyhow," he said, and walked away, leaving Texas staring at the clouded sky.

Texas wondered whether one of them intended to come back and release him after they had driven their herd across, or whether it was their purpose to leave him there to die. The man who had spoken to him seemed to know something about

him and his adventures in Cottonwood. No matter who he was or whence he came, Texas was certain that he would know him by his peculiar voice if he ever met him again. Surely there was not another voice in the world like that.

Somebody in Cottonwood must still be in the business of importing Texas cattle, perhaps with his connection in such transactions hidden from the cattlemen of that country. Fannie had said "that gang" as if she meant somebody in Cottonwood. These things Texas considered as he lay there, the pain of his tightly bound hands and feet increasing every moment.

This grew so intense in a short time as to be alarming. Texas believed that he must perish of it, in lingering agony, if somebody did not come soon and set him free. The hard, braided rawhide lariat had been pulled as tight as the strength of excited and vindictive hands could draw it; it cut into his flesh and stopped the return flow of blood from his extremities. All the time the pressure of his heart was pumping a little more blood past the bonds, but there was no force to send it back.

His hands were already swollen until he could not move his fingers. The pain was becoming maddening. He felt blood starting from beneath his finger nails; the gorged flesh ached and burned in an exaggeration of the wildest imaginings of

pain. It was agony such as being chained in fire, only it was more prolonged. Insensibility was a condition to be prayed for, even though it might be the end.

Texas shouted for help until his voice was only a moan; thrashed his body from side to side until he had no strength left to turn again, rebellious against this cruel punishment, frantic in his desire to burst his burning bonds. He gasped like a drowning man; his heart labored to suffocation against the poison of his stifled veins. Then in a rushing climax of pain his senses left him. His last wild, protesting thought was that he had come to the quicksands of death.

The cool plash of rain in his face woke Hartwell from his swoon on the threshold of death, and it was dawn. He was unable to believe for a while that the pain had gone out of his feet and hands, the pressure relaxed on his arms. His bonds hung loose on him, as if they had been cut. He could not believe it for a time, and had no strength to investigate, thinking, indeed, that it was only a rift in his incomparable visitation of cruelty.

It came to him quickly that his release from agony was due to the rain. The nature of dry rawhide is to stretch when wet, and the rain had come in time to ease the thongs which stifled his body

and choked out his life. Little by little he moved his arms, working the muscles out of their stiffness, every movement bringing back a faint reminder of his old pain. It required a long time to get one hand out of the wet rope and into his pocket for his knife, another almost hopeless spell of fumbling to open it with his swollen, numb fingers. When he stretched free of thongs at last, day was well on its way. The rain continued from the low-blowing clouds which had followed the cattle from Texas, as if to give them obscurity for their invasion of the forbidden land.

Texas found his feet and legs too tender to bear him at once. It was as if they had been frozen. Only after long chafing he was able to crawl, and crawling, he went to look for his horse, his intention being to mount and carry the alarm straight to Malcolm Duncan's ranch, almost forty miles to the north.

There was no trace of the animal near at hand; he believed the invaders had driven it away. Near the site of last night's fire he found his grub and scattered utensils where the invaders had kicked them about in the struggle. The circulation was restored to his extremities by the time he had cooked and eaten breakfast; it was possible to walk with little pain.

Further search for the horse discovered no trace

of it. Hours since he should have met the rider who patrolled the border to the east of him. According to orders this man would wait a reasonable time at the established meeting point, and then would ride forward into Texas's territory to find what was amiss.

Without doubt this man had discovered the herd and was now on his way to give the alarm. There was nothing left for Hartwell to do but face toward the north and tramp it to Duncan's ranch, doubly disgraced in the eyes of his employers.

Burdened by this humiliation, he started, only to run across his horse a mile or so up the creek. The animal's trail rope had become tangled in the brush, and it had wound itself up until it hadn't an inch to spare. It was nearly noon when he mounted to ride to Duncan's ranch.

They were at supper at the Duncan ranch when a man on a mud-spattered horse drew rein before the low sod house in its nest of cottonwoods. He left the panting creature standing with legs apart like a new-born colt, its head drooping, its nostrils flaring as it puffed in its fatigue. His shout brought Duncan to the door.

Dee Winch had ridden in not an hour before. He and Duncan's sons held their clatter of cutlery to listen to the report the trail-rider began to make.

At his first word Winch was on his feet, and in a second he had pushed past Duncan, where he stood bareheaded in the rain.

"Eight to ten thousand of 'em," the trail-rider was saying, "drove 'em through that Texas feller's beat."

Dee Winch went into the hall and took down his belt with its double holster, his hat and coat.

"How far have they come in?" Duncan inquired.

"Fifteen or twenty miles by now."

"Did you look for Hartwell?" Winch asked. He was adjusting his belt, ready in those few seconds to take the road.

"I rode over to look for him when he didn't meet me this morning, but I couldn't find hide nor hair of him anywheres. Then I run onto the trail of that herd, and follered it till I overtook 'em. I think they've got twenty-five or thirty men in the outfit, and they're as sassy as hell."

"They came expectin' a fight, and they knew right where to hit the line," Duncan said. He turned to Winch, his handsome face clouded and stern. "Do you think that stranger was in on it, Dee?"

"I think most anything of him right now," Winch returned.

"It looks to me like he was in on it, and came

here for the purpose of gettin' a job from us to open the gate to his friends."

"I never did like the slant of that feller's eye," the trail-rider said.

"We've got to turn that herd back before any more damage is done," Duncan said. "They've sown ticks enough by now to infect this whole range, like enough, but they've got to turn back and take the set trails if we have to kill off half of them, men and beasts, to make them do it! Boys, get your horses out!"

He gave one orders to ride to this ranch, another directions to hasten to that. The trail-rider he instructed to go in and eat his supper, then saddle a fresh horse and ride to the nearest ranch, rousing all hands to repel this insolent invasion. Dee Winch had gone for his horse. He was back for orders from Duncan while the others were getting into their slickers.

"I think you'd better take a scout down there, Dee, to find out where they are, and warn them not to come this way another mile. Tell them in plain words we meant it when we set them trails for Texas cattle, and we mean it when we say they've got to get out of here as quick as the Lord will let them!"

Winch swung into the saddle. Duncan lifted

his hand and stopped him as he was about to gallop away.

"If you see that man they call Texas—well, you'll know what to do; it was you that hired him."

"Yes, and by God, I'll pay him off!"

Winch's voice was down in his throat, like the growl of a dog mouthing a bone. Duncan stood looking after him a moment as he galloped into the south, then turned into the house to belt himself for the fight.

CHAPTER XI

THE TEST

WHEN Hartwell arrived at Duncan's along in the night he found a strong party of ranchers and cowboys gathered to ride against the Texans and drive them back across the quarantine line. He had recovered fully from the hard experience of the night before, but his horse was spent, for he had not spared it in the ride of forty miles.

Nobody among the men assembled knew him as he flung himself from his heaving horse in the light of the lanterns. He knew that the news of the Texans' invasion had beaten him there by many hours when he saw the preparations going forward. A dozen men or more were gathered round a wagon into which supplies were being loaded from Duncan's warehouse, their horses hitched along the fence.

Duncan came out of the covered chuck wagon when he heard Texas inquiring for him, a lantern in his hand. He stood at the tail of the wagon, his lantern lifted high to look under it, throwing its

full light over Hartwell's mud-spattered figure as he hurried up to report.

"I've been a long time reachin' here, sir," said Texas, hardly knowing how to begin his tale of surprise, humiliation, and defeat.

"Yes, you have," Duncan replied, still holding the light aloft, looking sternly into the trail-rider's face.

The others drew near as Texas drove straight into his story. Out of gratitude for Fannie Goodnight's betrayal of the plot to him, although such betrayal had come too late, Texas kept her part in it to himself.

"They roped me while I was eatin' my supper by Clear Creek, sir, and tied me up so tight I almost died. I lost my senses and lay there thataway till the rain stretched the rawhide and eased it. I've come through to you, sir, as fast as I *could* come, but I realize I've made a mighty poor figure in the business, all the way through."

Duncan lowered the lantern, lifted it, looked again into the trail-rider's face.

"Yes, and you're either one of that Texas outfit or you sold out to them!" Duncan charged.

"That's right!" spoke a voice out of the dark.

"I felt that you might take it thataway," said Texas, almost suffocated by his great shame and the injustice of this charge which he was powerless

to refute in any convincing manner by word or deed.

"What did you take the trouble to come up here for, then? Haven't you got sense enough to know you've rammed your neck right into the rope? We're not fools enough to turn a wolf loose a second time."

Duncan's manner was even more threatening than his words. It was plain that he believed Texas had betrayed his trust, and was so deeply set in that belief it would take something more than words to remove the conviction. The other men were ominously silent.

"If I'd been one of them, or even sold out to them, I wouldn't 'a' come, Mr. Duncan, sir."

Texas had expected to meet suspicion and distrust, but he had not looked for such cold prejudgment and unfair passing of sentence. There was not a spark of resentment or anger in him, even at that; only a desire that was almost frantic to save his honor and clear himself of what appeared in the eyes of the cattlemen a monstrous crime.

"We didn't expect you to," said Duncan shortly; "but now that you're here you've saved us a lot of trouble."

There was a short laugh at that. The sound ran through the little knot of men like a growl.

"I'll go wherever you say, and I'll do whatever

you wish, to prove to you I'm square," Texas told them earnestly.

"You can begin by handin' over that gun," Duncan suggested, reaching out his hand.

Texas stepped back. There was a quick, uneasy movement among the others as they drew away from the wagon, as if to get out of the light, for Hartwell's reputation with a gun had spread over the range from his meeting with Johnnie Mackey's gang in Cottonwood.

"I'll go with you and help you turn them southern cow-men back, sir, or I'll go alone and do my best to turn 'em, but, gentlemen, I'm goin' to keep this gun."

Duncan did not speak for a little while. The others edged back into the circle of light, and drew near to where Duncan stood, judicial and gray, as if thinking the proposal over.

"All right," said he at last, "you can go with us. There's a little man by the name of Winch that wants to see you, anyhow."

They dismissed Texas with that, and left him to his own devices while they hurried on with the freighting of the wagon. From the look of things they were preparing to make a regular campaign of it. Rations for many days were being loaded, and Duncan's camp cook was hitching in two teams to haul the heavy wagon to the front.

Texas changed his saddle to a fresh horse from among the number in the corral, nobody paying the slightest attention to him. Even Mrs. Duncan, who came and went between house and wagon like a laboring and anxious ant, did not speak to him when she met him face to face.

It transpired that they were not waiting on the wagon, but for one of Duncan's boys to come with an addition to the fighting force. The lad arrived an hour or so after Texas, bringing with him five men. Duncan sought Hartwell, where he sat on the very bench that he had occupied one tenderly treasured night with Sallie McCoy, his saddled horse near at hand.

"You'll ride in front with me," said he briefly, and passed on.

Long since the rain had blown by, and the stars were brilliant in the washed, clear air. Like shadows the men were mounting and gathering for the ride. Texas leaped into the saddle and followed Malcolm Duncan to the head of the party. They rode forward without a word.

It was not an occasion for words, indeed. Texas realized that as well as the deepest concerned in the crowd. The fortunes of some of these men were menaced by that approaching herd of southern cattle. Between that night and the first killing frost, still several weeks off, disease might be spread by

the ticks all over the range. Already miles of the finest grazing country had been infected. Grazing in the territory traversed by the Texas herd was at an end until next spring, and there would be a risk in it then. No wonder they were bitter against him, Hartwell thought.

Morning disclosed that the Texans had rushed their long-winded cattle forward with little pause. They had penetrated twenty-five miles into the forbidden country, and had come to camp now with their great herd spread wide, watched by double the number of herders usually employed to control that many cattle.

Dee Winch met the defenders of the range at sunrise, coming from his camp on the flank of the Texas herd, where he had hung like a wily old wolf waiting the arrival of his friends. He did not return Hartwell's greeting, but looked him straight in the face as he rode up to Duncan and made his report.

The Texans were defiant, he said. They held themselves to be within their rights, and they would defend such rights at any cost. So there seemed to be no way out of it but through a fight. They rode on to the place where Winch had camped, talking it over between them. Winch and Duncan had a few words apart, about him, Hartwell be-

lieved, for after that Winch avoided him, and did not even look his way.

Indeed, Texas felt himself as one considered of lower caste when the party dismounted at the little stream and set about getting breakfast from the emergency supplies which each man had brought behind his saddle. They ignored him so completely that he withdrew down the stream a little way and made his fire. He had no coffee, and very little flour, for the rain had penetrated his mess that night he lay bound in the Texans' thongs. But nobody inquired into his necessities, and he was too proud to make them known.

There he broiled his last few slices of bacon and cooked a wad of dough on a stick, and ate his breakfast in bitterness of heart over this unjust, if not altogether unreasonable condemnation. His tobacco had been soaked by the rain, and the bit of it that he had dried in his palm before the fire had a miserable taste. All through, life had a bad flavor to him that morning, and there was not much on the horizon to offer him cheer. He was tired and sleepy, and glad only that there was sun in place of rain. As he sat there reflecting on his uncomfortable situation all round, Winch approached.

Texas looked up at him, not forgetting the cold

unfriendliness that he had seen in Winch's face a little while before, nor the ignored greeting that he had given him. He was in no mood now to risk another rebuff, so he held his peace and waited for Winch to unfreight his mind.

"That's a kind of a thin story you've come in with, young feller," said Winch. He had stopped off a few feet from where Texas sat, and stood looking at him, a little twitching in his mustache as if he were about to smile. But there was no smile in his eyes, small and gray, smaller now for the frown on his sharp, thin face.

Texas drew deep on his cigarette, tossed the butt into the fire, got up deliberately, turned and looked Winch straight in the eyes.

"Yes, I admit it is a purty thin kind of a story to come into a crowd of suspicious men with, especially men that have judged before they have heard any evidence at all."

"What do you call that if it ain't evidence?"

Winch pointed to the distant herd grazing on the forbidden grass.

"It does look bad for a stranger from Taixas, I'll admit, Winch."

"I didn't take you for a man that would double-cross a friend that had done you a favor, Hartwell."

"No, you didn't, Winch. And you measured me

right, sir. I wouldn't double-cross a friend; I never did in my life."

"I look at this as a personal matter, Hartwell. I hired you; it all comes back to me to carry. That story of yours about bein' roped is a purty hard one for me to swaller."

"It hurts me more to confess it than it does you to hear it, Winch. It's the truth, and you can swaller it or you can spit it out, sir!"

Hartwell's slow anger was beginning to rise; the injustice of it looked bigger to him every moment. The scowl darkened on Winch's face; his big mustache twitched again as if he was about to smile.

"I'll spit it out, then!" he said.

There was a challenge in the cold glare that he gave Hartwell; he stepped back a little, shaking his shoulders like a cock.

"I didn't seek a qua'l with you, sir," said Texas, meeting him eye to eye, "nor with any man on this range. But I've got my name and honor to defend, sir, and I'll defend 'em the best way I know how to do it."

"It'll take a whole lot more than your own word to clear you, Hartwell."

"I've promised Duncan to help turn them cattle back over the line, and I'm goin' to do it. If you want to see me afterwards, I'll be at your service, sir."

"I'll want to see you, all right, pardner, unless this thing happens to turn out the way you tell it. If it does, I'll take off my hat to you and apologize."

"I wouldn't ask it of you, sir," Texas returned loftily, plainly conveying to the notorious gunslinger that his opinion, one way or the other, mattered very little.

"We're goin' up there on the hill to call them fellers out for a talk and lay down the law. Duncan wants you to go along with me and him and two or three more. We'll be ready in a minute."

"I'll be on hand when wanted, sir," Texas said.

He looked after Winch as he walked away, his hairy chaparejos accentuating the curve of his ridiculous short legs until he looked more like a crab than a man. There was a feeling of hardness in him against this man Winch, more than against any other in the band. Winch knew him better than any of the others, and should be able to judge him with more justice. It looked as if prejudice had made him blind and unreasonable, or that he wanted to seize on this pretext of personal affront to add one more to his bloody toll of men.

Texas wondered what Duncan's purpose in having him go with the parleying party might be. He thought, with contempt for such smallness and distrust, that it might be to keep him under the eyes of Winch, whose name on the range was equal to

twenty armed men. It seemed now as if they believed he had returned to Duncan's as part of his plan to assist his supposed comrades; they did not feel it safe to allow him out of sight of their official gunner for one minute.

What a contemptible thing it was to hold a man's word so worthless! He would rather believe the tales of five rogues, and lose by his trust, than wound one honest man by calling him a liar. But all men were not alike, he reflected, looking back over his own experiences. Mainly, he had suffered by being too ready to take men at their word. He would have been a good deal richer that morning if he hadn't gone so far on the bare statements of people whom he feared to hurt by requiring of them their references.

This he turned in his mind as he went for his horse, and came leading it back to where his saddle lay. After all, he couldn't blame Duncan and the rest of them. He had no reason for flying up that way as he had done with Winch, and challenging him to fight. He stood in a bad light, and it was a great deal to ask of them that they accept him on his unsupported word.

Things began to clear for him, and the surliness began to melt out of his heart. With its going the determination to do something to retrieve himself burned with a new flame. He would prove his loy-

alty to the men who had hired him to guard their country if he had to do it by riding single-handed and alone against that bunch from Texas. He would do it even at the cost of his life, for life was a mighty small thing when stripped of its habiliments of honor. So he thought as he mounted and rode to join Duncan and the others, and set out for the top of the hill.

Duncan rode ahead, carrying a white handkerchief tied to a sunflower stem. At the crest of the hill, half a mile or so from the Texans' camp, he waved it in signal for a parley. In a little while three men came riding up the slope.

The Texans had drawn the wagons of their outfit in a circle, making a corral for the horses, after the manner of men who were prepared for emergencies, and were ready for a fight. This camp was fully a mile in advance of the herd, and in a position that would be difficult to take.

Hartwell looked out over the great herd from the hilltop. It was scattered over miles of the range, with a rider here and there to hold it in some semblance of form and keep it moving slowly toward the north. But it was evident from the position of the camp that the southern drovers did not expect to advance beyond that point until the question of their right had been met and settled.

Duncan told the delegation from the camp that

they must turn back and take the trails set by the association. He was calm and moderate in his words and manner, and made a good case, it appeared to Texas, no bluster or threat about him at all.

"The stand you Kansas fellers take might be all right in case a herd of diseased cattle come into your country," the southern invaders' leader replied; "but it don't hold water when it comes to a clean herd like this. Them cattle's as clean as any on this range. I'm sorry we can't oblige you, pardner, but we didn't drive eight hundred miles and more to turn back."

"It's unlucky for all concerned that you see it that way," Duncan told him. "We're going to protect this range; that's what we're here for."

"Yes, and we've got to ship our cattle, pardner. We've got our cars ordered, I expect some of them's in there at Cottonwood waitin' on us now. We're not goin' to turn back a head of these cattle, and we're not goin' to pay demurrage on them cars. Kansas ain't bigger than Uncle Sam. He ain't drawed no quarantine line along here and said we couldn't cross it."

"We're plenty big enough to do what we're here to do, my friend."

"Well, go on and do it." The Texan made as if the interview was at an end. He started to pull

his horse around and ride off. One of his companions restrained him, and Duncan took up the argument again.

"I'm not here to chaw this thing over with you and get nowhere," he said. "We've given you your marching orders, and you'll march! We've got a big bunch of men down here, and more on the way, and you'll turn that herd and start back inside of twenty-four hours or you'll bite lead. Now, that's all there is to it."

"I don't care if you've got all hell and half of Kansas down here; we're goin' on to Cottonwood to load our cattle!"

In spite of his declaration that he wasn't there for argument, Duncan went deeper into the matter, still holding himself in hand with admirable control, it appeared to Hartwell, putting the case to the Texans in the light of justice between man and man. It was evident that he desired to avoid a fight if it could be done, and equally plain that he was firm in his intention to enforce the association's quarantine.

Not until the government drew a line against Texas cattle would they observe it, the southerner replied, getting hotter every minute as he recounted the wrongs, or alleged wrongs, that Texas drovers had suffered at the Kansans' hands.

"But the way you people look at it there's nothing

wrong in coming in here and poisoning our herds," said Duncan. "Well, boys, I suppose we might as well go back."

"Here," Winch called to the Texans who were riding away—"this man belongs to your outfit, I guess."

The Texans turned. "Which?" the spokesman asked.

"This man," said Winch, pointing to Hartwell—"I guess he strayed away from your bunch. Take him along with you if you want him."

"If that's a Kansas joke," said the Texan, in marked contempt, "it's a damn poor brand!"

They rode on with the bearing of men who believed some kind of a trick had been attempted on them, which was a reflection on their common human understanding. Now and then one of them looked back, face eloquent of the disdain in which such clumsy performers were held.

This denial of Texas by the enemy did not appear to lift him any higher in the esteem of his companions. He believed that Winch had said that of him for the mere purpose of adding to his humiliation, or in the hope of forcing a fight.

This he was determined for the present to keep clear of. He knew that it would be harder every hour to bear the indignities which they would heap on him, the insults which they would offer; but he

knew also that they would not shoot him in cold blood without more proof against him than they had. He would bear it until the expiration of Duncan's limit to the Texans, and then when it came to the test of turning the herd back across the line, he would show them what small-caliber people most of them were.

It came up cloudy again that afternoon, with the threat of a rainy night. A misty autumnal drizzle began a little before dusk, and through it the Texans could be seen closing up their scattered herd. Hartwell understood this move. It would require fewer men to girdle the herd, thus adding to the fighting force. The Texans were not going to turn back.

Duncan's wagon had come up with the supplies, and the camp cook had supper in abundance for all hands. Texas did not wait for an invitation, but presented himself and received his share. He had gone without dinner, and this generous hot meal was very welcome and cheering. He had caught a little sleep during the day, stretched out on his slicker, and now felt a whole lot better disposed toward the world, and all in it, even though they did not call him into the council that was going on around the camp cook's fire.

The night fell thickly, with a gentle wind blowing the warm mist. The lowing of the southern

herd came faintly, telling of the unrest so characteristic of those beasts, known well to Texas from many a long night watch. Winch came to him where he stood listening to the long, plaintive calls of the cattle, something in them so expressive of lonesomeness and longing for their native plains that it was almost as moving as a human appeal.

"Hartwell, we've talked over your case, and some of them think maybe there's something to that story you told about them fellers ropin' you. We're goin' to give you the benefit of the doubt, as the old man says."

"All right," said Texas, not able to warm up very readily toward Winch, speaking rather crabbed and short.

"We're goin' to give you a chance to prove you're square with us and set yourself right, kid. You're a cowman; you know Texas cattle, I guess, better than any of us."

"I wouldn't set up any such wide claims, sir."

"That herd's uneasy; you can feel it clear over here. It was the same last night—I heard them turn the point of a stampede three or four times. If you want to square yourself, you go over there to-night and stampede that herd toward the line. Start 'em toward Texas once and they'll go at a blind lope till they drop. Then you can come back —clean."

It was a wild and unreasonable proposal, almost mocking, coming from cattlemen. Texas knew that the chance a man had of stampeding a herd like that was not a thousand in one in his favor, and even though he might start a stampede point, he would have just as much control over the direction it might take as a cyclone. He stood considering it, choking down a hot reply.

"But I give it to you straight, kid, this ain't throwin' down the bars to you to lope off yourself. If you don't go out and try to do this job you'll stand convicted in the eyes of every cattleman on this range, and it'll rest between me and you the next time we meet."

"You might dispense with reference to our future meetin's, sir, if you please," said Texas haughtily. "In most any company I feel I'm able to hold up my head, and I'll not shame your reputation, sir, if you ever feel called to sling your gun down on me. Let it stand understood between us thataway, sir."

"I'm not tryin' to force a fight on you, Hartwell. Nothing would suit me better than to see you cleared of this. But I'm responsible to the men on this range for your bein' here, and if you fail to do what I'm linin' out for you to-night, you'll have to settle with me. And that's the last word, Hartwell."

"I can stand on my own feet, Mr. Winch, sir; I

can carry my own blame, and take the consequences for all the wrong I do any livin' man. It's a plumb fool thing you gentlemen's set for me to do, but I'm just a big enough fool to try it, even if I lose."

Texas flung the saddle on his horse, Winch standing by making that peculiar little hissing noise through his slant teeth. It was as if he tried to whistle softly, but the slant of his teeth was too sharp to confine the steam.

"You'd better wait till it's a little later," he suggested.

"It's my expedition, sir; I'll start whenever I feel called on to start."

"And come back—when?"

"In time enough to meet you, sir, any time and place you pick."

Texas stood a moment with his toe in the stirrup, his face turned to Winch as if waiting his arrangement of the next meeting. The little bow-legged gun-slinger said nothing; only waved his hand as if passing that along to a future time.

Hartwell rode away with the headlong suddenness of a bee striking a line for its tree. He was so indignant, so thoroughly angry, over the impossible thing they had laid out for him to do that he would have fought them all in a bunch. But he was reasonable enough to know that it was no state of mind for a man to rise up in and meet a great

emergency. He must ride that mood out of his blood, and consider this thing from all the angles that experience had given him.

Impossible as the cattlemen's task appeared, it would speak better for his honor to attempt it and fall at the Texans' hands than to leave the country without having tried it, or return and kill Winch. Killing Winch would not vindicate him of the present charge. It would only make men a little more afraid of him, and perhaps darken the cloud of suspicion and distrust that had so unfortunately descended upon him.

CHAPTER XII

THE STAMPEDE

"Co-o-ome all you Texas Rangers
Wherev-er you may be,
I'll tell you of a sto-ry
That *hap*-pen-ed un-to me."

THE cowboy was directly ahead of Hartwell as he rode through the southern herd, singing in high, wavering voice to quiet the cattle, which were milling restlessly. Here and there the plaintive tenor of a steer's lowing joined the herder's doleful melody; here and there sounded a rush of hoofs as the cattle crowded, huddling together for comfort in the face of dangers which they imagined filled the night.

Over all the great herd this uneasiness was apparent. There was a sound of shuffling bodies, of clashing horns, as the beasts pressed together in confusion. The cowboy was going on with his song in his endeavor to lull the fear of his charges. Texas could picture him, young and slim as his voice indicated, riding slowly among the shadowy beasts.

"Pre-e-e-haps you have a mother,
A sister fond and true,
Or maybe-so a *dear* wife
To weep and mourn for you."

So he carried his song along; that almost interminable song that has been sung by countless cowboys from the Rio Grande to the Little Missouri, carrying Texas back with it to the days of his own boyhood when he had stood many a lonesome watch like that.

Away over to the left of him another high-pitched singer could be heard in the long pauses between the nearer cowboy's stanzas. He was too far off to catch his words, but Texas could supply them to the tune, which came across the night over the sighing herd as clear as a bugle call.

"Oh, beat the drum slowly,
And play the fife lowly,
And drink to my health as you bear me along—"

That was the way it began. The ways in which it ended were varied, according to locality, tradition, and the personal taste of the singer. Only in all of them they buried him as he longed to be laid down, and the wolves howled over him, and the snows of winter fell, all in the melancholy cadence that was sadder than any dirge when it came on the

night wind and the rain from the lips of some singer watching beside his straining herd.

It was plain to the schooled ear of Hartwell that the leaven of stampede was working in the dull brains of those cattle, evident that it needed but some little thing to set them off, as the shifting of a rock precipitates the avalanche. But a man on a horse was hardly the needed element in their almost complete panic, for they were accustomed to looking to men on horses for protection, assurance, guidance, through all the adventures of the long road and the range. A coyote might do it; a bat flying in the face of an animal might do it; but it was a long chance against a man on a horse.

Texas was ready and willing enough on his own account to make as much trouble for the southern drovers, and cause them as much damage as he could to balance in some measure the tortures he had suffered at their hands. The night favored any reprisal that he might be able to devise. It was so dark there was no sky-line; the cattle floundering up from their uneasy rest in front of his horse, or moving aside, almost indifferent to his presence in their steaming midst, were indistinct the length of his horse's neck, invisible a few feet away.

He rode through the herd, keeping the wind in his face to hold his direction, for without it he

would have been like a cat in a sack. He wanted to draw as far away from the singing cowboy as possible before starting any commotion among the cattle.

Texas was feeling his way through to find, if possible, the place where the cattle were most uneasy. He could sense this spot in the night as well as in the day the moment that he rode into it, for the cattle would be milling like a slow whirlpool. From this trampling swirl of cattle a leader would break away now and then, followed by others, and start off on the aimless run of stampede. This little off-throwing from the revolving wheel of the herd was called a "point" in the tongue of the range, and it was to turn these points back into the herd, and confuse and submerge the leaders, that the cowboys stood alert on the borders of the drove. If Texas could luckily ride into one of these incipient stampedes the cattle could be urged on in spite of the herders' efforts to turn the point.

Over there, where that young-voiced cowboy was singing his long song of the man who left his *dear* wife and numerous relations to go to the thorny wastes of the Rio Grande and join the Texas Rangers, the sound of the greatest disquietude came. For that spot Texas headed, the rain blowing in his face.

He could not recall ever having ridden in a

darker night. As he rode he felt the pressure against his legs of the bodies of cattle which he could not see. Great perils would lie ahead of and around a man riding blindly with a stampeding herd that night. Ordinarily it was a situation of aggravated dangers, but in such darkness the risks were multiplied many times. The first unseen ravine would be a trap, the first wash across the prairie—some of them with banks twenty feet deep—would mean a trampled, mangled, smothering death.

But all this had to be faced and dared, for his honor's sake. He was there to stampede that herd, or a part of it at least—he had very little hope that all of it could be drawn into the flight—and prove his loyalty to the men who had put their interests into his trust. He could hear the cowboy talking to his horse between snatches of his song, and he knew that it was an anxious hour for that lone sentinel there in that strange black land.

Here the cattle were milling in their distracted, senseless way, held back by the herder, whose voice and presence partly assured them, but could not entirely calm their fears. Texas had difficulty in forcing his way among them, his aim being to reach the outer edge.

Suddenly his horse, floundering impatiently through the dull stream of beasts, landed almost on

top of an animal which, through fatigue or indifference, had lain down in the midst of all the excitement and unrest. The creature came to its feet with a snort, giving Hartwell's horse such a start that it reared and squealed. Instantly there came a challenge from the cowboy, who could not have been, by the distinctness of his voice, more than ten rods away. Hartwell bent low to blot himself into the blackness of the herd, caution unnecessary, for he could not have been seen if he had stood twenty feet tall. The commotion caused by riding upon the sleeping animal almost precipitated the panic that Hartwell hoped to complete.

The cowboy, whose sharp ears told him that some enemy had entered the herd, was coming that way, shooting as he advanced. Texas could see him in imagination, his horse rearing against the surging stream of cattle as if it battled with a flooded river. He was shouting his mightiest, a cry high-pitched and tremulous, like the howl of a coyote. Others were answering him, coming to him, Hartwell knew, as fast as they could gallop.

Hartwell had no intention of discovering himself to them by replying to the cowboy's shots, for he was in no danger from that source. He could hear the bullets go splitting high over his head, and knew very well that the herder would not risk killing his own cattle to shoot at a presence only suspected. He

urged his horse forward, and that creature, scornful of the cattle in his superior wisdom, and out of patience with their indifference to its efforts to force a passage, bit them in the little charges that it now and then had room to make.

Adding to this stimulation, Texas began beating them with his heavy wet hat, careless now about keeping his location or his intentions concealed. The cowboy was looking for him, cursing and yelling. Near at hand others were whooping and shooting, and out of the herd the confused noise of clashing horns, hoofs beating the sodden earth, rose and grew with every breath.

There was no longer any lowing, nor that indescribable sad moaning such as they make before they lift their voices in the long plaint of homesickness. Panic was among them now; they were snorting to be away. Confusion, blackness, the scent of rain-wet, steaming beasts; a struggle, a scramble of his horse's feet as if it lunged up a steep bank, and Hartwell broke through. His horse ran on, unable to check itself under the force that it had put into its labor to get clear, and after it came the point of the stampede.

Hartwell heard the sudden change in the slow soft trampling of hoofs. It rose suddenly into a muffled roar, which grew like flood water, filling the night. He rode hard ahead of the stampede,

hoping that he could draw off to one side and avoid being swept away. All around him he could hear the cattle, their horns clashing as they pressed together with a sound like hail in a field of corn.

Hartwell had lost his direction. The wind was no longer his guide, for he was riding faster than any wind except a hurricane. The cattle were bearing him along like a leaf in a freshet. Behind him the roar increased as the fury of flight possessed them, the pressure of that vast body of charging beasts beyond the power of any man to check. If his horse should fall, or its endurance prove unequal to the flight, they would be crushed together, as men and horses had been trampled in stampedes of his recollection.

There was only one thing to do, and that bear ahead with the cattle in their furious blind race. They were poisoned with the great fear which the understanding of man could not compass nor sound. The sound of their own flight increased the terror which their unreasoning brains had hatched. They would run on until their tongues lolled out from thirst, their eyes glazed, their heads hung between their legs.

That horse of Duncan was a sound-winded animal. In spite of the strain he held his own with the beasts, to which panic had lent speed and endurance not ordinarily their own.

It seemed to Hartwell that the stampede lasted for hours. Fortunately, the prairie had not yet been crossed by a creek or gully, and now the cattle were beginning to thin around him, the sound of their running to fall away. He checked his horse and began to work his way through the straggling beasts. Dawn was breaking when he at last rode clear of them. Ahead of him was the dark fringe of timber along a stream. As far as he could see through the breaking darkness the prairie was filled with cattle. The fright outrun, these had fallen to grazing, or had dropped wearily to rest, the cause of their late panic forgotten, if it was ever known.

Hartwell believed, from the appearance of things, that the whole herd had stampeded. It must be scattered for miles by now, he knew, for the habit of the beasts was to spread as the terror wore out of them. The Texans might have weeks of work collecting the cattle again to resume the drive.

He had no idea where he was, and cared little. He had accomplished what had seemed the impossible; the herd was stampeded, the sincerity of his purpose had been proved. He unsaddled his fagged horse, hobbled it, and turned it to graze and rest, then threw himself down on the sogged turf to sleep, for he was weary to the marrow. The day then dawning would have to take care of itself in its own way, as it would do anyway, no matter for

all the worry that he might expend on it in advance.

It was the pleasant sensation of the sun feeling through his wet garments that woke Hartwell. He found himself on a knoll close by the creek, but the locality was strange to him. As for that, any locality in that part of the country would have been strange, except the few miles with which he had become familiar as he rode the trail. There were no cattle very near him now, and nobody in sight. He concluded that the Texans had not yet arrived, due, very likely, to having followed some other branch of their stampeding herd. He did not want to meet any of them that morning, either, for they would not be in any amicable mood.

Food was his first thought, for the need of it was insistent above all others. He hadn't a scrap with him, and he didn't know which way to face to find a habitation. He knew it would be a safe undertaking to follow the creek, in either direction. Somebody in that country of ranches would be located on it, and no matter if the cattle had run clear down into the Nation, there would be something for a hungry rider. This course he pursued, turning toward the east, for that direction lay on his right hand, and Hartwell was a right-handed man, morally as well as physically, and it was the direction that suited him best.

Cattle were spread over miles of country, and at

last he sighted the Texans making some effort to gather them up again. But there seemed to be a sort of dazed heartlessness in their work, as of men stunned by the task that confronted them. Hartwell found a good deal of satisfaction in that. It was something, at least, on account of what he owed them for that night of torture in the rawhide rope.

He kept close to the creek, skirting along in the brush. Until midday he followed the stream, hardly out of sight of cattle all the way. That herd had stampeded to the last animal, he believed, with broadening satisfaction. The knowledge of his complete success was like the scent of broiling steak. It made him sit up in the saddle and feel rather keen and eager, in spite of the mauling in body and mind which the past three days had given him.

It began to be impressed on him about that time, dimly and not quite understood at first, that he was coming into a country where he had been before. There was something familiar in the sweep of the creek here, something—and there ahead of him, in the elbow of the stream as he rose the ridge, was Malcolm Duncan's ranch.

There it was, as peaceful to behold in the midday sun of that autumn day as a picture in a frame upon the wall. Several horses were hitched in front, and even at that distance he could tell by the way they stood that they had been ridden hard and

far. Around him on the prairie, grazing and lying about as if it belonged to them, were the Texas cattle, scattered far and wide.

He had stampeded them, beyond any doubt. But he had stampeded them in the wrong direction!

The humor of the situation struck him first. He leaned back in his saddle and almost laughed. They had sent him to stampede the herd, with directions that he stampede it toward Texas. He wondered how many of them ever had gone out on a dark night and stampeded a herd of eight or ten thousand half-wild cattle according to directions. The wonderful thing, as he saw it, was that he had set them off at all.

But those Kansas drovers would see neither the humor nor the marvel of it. That he understood very well. What they would say, what they would do, he could conjecture without a strain, for there was ruin standing in their very doors, delivered by his hand.

Still, his own conscience was easy. He had gone about the business honestly, and he had done as much as any man among them could have done, and more than any one of them would have attempted. He didn't owe any of them anything, and his duty lay straight ahead to report to Malcolm Duncan on the result of his night's work.

The situation was not without its satisfaction.

Those cattlemen had been quick to jump to his condemnation; they had planned this task for him, and the work of their own scheming had fallen and buried them. He had a sardonic pleasure in the anticipation of their various expressions of face when they should see him riding up to the corral.

Hartwell saw that they had recognized him while he was half a mile away. They came out of the house bareheaded, leaving the dinner-table he suspected, to look at him. Then they ducked in again, for their hats and vests and guns.

This picture of their preparation to receive him provoked a smile. A cow-man couldn't do anything but eat without his vest. He must have it on for any serious business, as a Freemason his ceremonial-apron. They would come out buttoning themselves up in corduroy and duck and velveteen in a minute, ready to take him right when he arrived.

But it was a serious matter for him, about as serious as a man ever faced, and he knew that, too. Yet there was that background of humor in the fact that he had stampeded the herd fifteen or twenty miles in the very direction that its owners wanted it to go, which he could not altogether dismiss. If Duncan, or even Dee Winch, could get a glimpse of it he would come out of that queer adventure without a fight.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CARTEL

HARTWELL was spattered with mud from foot to eyebrow. Some of it had dried and fallen off, some had set only the firmer for being dry, leaving him speckled and mottled as by some peculiar disease that infected not only the man, but his raiment as well. His beard was just long enough to hold the gobs of mud flung into his face from the hoofs of the cattle as he made that wild ride among them, and if appearances were to be taken at face value, Texas Hartwell was a desperate man indeed as he rode down to Malcolm Duncan's gate.

He did not see Winch among the men assembled to receive him. Duncan stood to the fore, the sun in his iron-gray hair, his sleeves turned up from his long, muscular arms, just as he had put down his knife and fork. Texas flung himself from the saddle at the corral gate and began to undo his cinch. Duncan came over to him, the others stopping off a little way, plainly in accord with some prearranged plan.

"Well, you stampeded 'em," said Duncan, an air

of constraint about him, as of a man uncertain of his way.

"It looks that way, sir," Texas replied, still busy with his girths.

Duncan stood silent, watching him as closely as if unsaddling a horse was some rare feat, and Hartwell, an expert, come to demonstrate it. Hartwell stripped off the saddle and threw it on the fence.

"You'd better have spread a sack of poison over the grass," Duncan said. "Well, you stood by your friends, you got their cattle into this country, anyhow. We've got to give you credit for that, Hartwell—if that's your name."

Texas unbridled the horse, patted its neck affectionately, turned it into the corral, where it threw itself down in the mud and rolled, grunting its satisfaction over its relaxation after its hard night.

"Gentlemen, Hartwell is my name," said he, "and it's a name that's never been disgraced by any man that answered to it. I went out last night to do the job you laid out for me, not hopin' to be able to put it through, but aimin' to do my best."

The humor that he had seen in the muddle of the stampede had all gone out of the situation now. These men were earnest in their belief that he was one of the southern drovers' gang, and it was going to be something far from a laughing matter to change their belief.

"I guess you did your best—and your worst," Duncan retorted.

"I don't know what argument I can make, sirs, to convince you that I'm square with you, and always have been since the minute I went to work. I don't aim to excuse myself for lettin' them rope me down yonder, and I'm not goin' to try. I don't know a man in that outfit by sight, and only one of them by his voice. I'm goin' to look for that man and bring him before you. Maybe you'll take his word for it where you hate to take mine."

"There wouldn't be any proof in a thief speaking for a thief, Hartwell."

Hartwell's face gorged with blood at the word "thief" as if apoplexy had taken him. He drew himself up in all the austerity of his lean frame and severe face and looked Duncan in the eye with a directness that made the big cow-man draw back a step.

"I'd go kind of easy on that word, sir," Hartwell warned him.

"Yes, I guess I shouldn't say that," Duncan reflected, with the bearing of a man who wanted to be fair. "It's a man's business to stand by his friends, and I can't blame you for that. But I do blame you, Hartwell, for taking a spy's advantage of us, crawlin' in the way you did and takin' that job of trail-rider."

"It came to me before I even started to find it, sir."

"Well, there's no use to stand here and chaw words over it, Hartwell. It's done, them Texas cattle are in here, and it may take two or three weeks to round up our herds and pick them out. Maybe they're clean cattle, maybe they're not—time alone can show that. But crooked or square, you're a bold man, Hartwell, to ride back here and face a bunch of men that believe you've done them damage beyond calculation."

Texas turned from him in his high dignity, out of patience with a man of Duncan's breadth for being so blind. Even when Hartwell's strongest plea of innocence was on his tongue he was too narrow to understand it. A guilty man would not have come back; he would have been under no such necessity.

"There's your horse, and here's your saddle, Mr. Duncan, sir. I've got three weeks' pay comin' to me, if you can see it that way, sir."

"Well, I don't see it that way!"

Duncan spoke harshly, bristling with indignation. Hartwell heard others remarking on the wonder of his gall, and what ought to be handed out to him as pay.

"I reckon I can live without it, sir," said Texas, loftily.

"You're a lucky man that we're allowin' you to get out of here with your life. They say you walked into this country; well, walk out of it, and walk fast!"

"Hold on, Duncan! I've got a spoon to put into this pot."

The speaker came forward, rolling in his gait like a bear. He was a man as big as Duncan, but with none of his handsomeness, little of his intelligence. His shirt-collar was open on his bristling neck, his hat was on his eyebrows, and he was a red, raw-mouthed savage out of whom curses came pouring like foul water from a drain. He drew up before Hartwell, where he stood with his legs straddled, looking at him with malevolent contempt.

"You say you're on the square with us, and you think we're fools enough to swaller it, don't you?"

"I don't expect anything reasonable or just from you at all, sir!"

"Yes, and if you was on the square them Texas fellers'd 'a' shot you so full of holes your hide wouldn't 'a' made shoe-strings! Yes, an' Winch and these fellers knew it when they sent you over there on that fool errant. I wasn't there, I didn't have no hand in it, and I'd 'a' stood out ag'in' it till hell froze over if I'd 'a' been!"

"Sir, I think I'll be on my way," said Texas,

speaking to Duncan, ignoring the blustering cattleman entirely.

"Not till I git through with you, young feller, you won't! An' maybe you won't then."

"Let him go, Sawyer; we haven't got proof enough against him to hold him," Duncan said.

"I got proof enough to satisfy me, Duncan. More than any man in this valley I stand to lose by them fever ticks you and your damn gang's sowed over my ranch, young feller. Them cattle's over there mixed up with mine, and they'll all have the fever before ten days, and I'll be cleaned out. Do you reckon I'm goin' to stand by and see the varmint that done it sneak off to his hole and me not move a hand?"

"Oh, well, Sawyer, if it'll do you any good."

Duncan indulged him, like a headstrong child. The others drew round in a half circle, knowing fully what was coming.

"You stampeded 'em in here, you and them other Texas fellers combined—it wasn't no one-man job, and I ain't fool enough to believe it was. I didn't ketch you doin' it, and I ain't got no call, 'cordin' to law, to pull out and shoot you in your tracks, but if you'll take off that there gun and stand up to me I'll give you the damndest thumpin' a man ever packed!"

Texas had noticed from the beginning of Sawyer's arraignment that he was not armed. It came to him at once that this badgering was an attempt to separate him from his own gun and throw him into their hands defenseless. He stood considering it, Sawyer mistaking his silence for a shortage on courage. He renewed his insults and defiance.

"You got a name over in Cottonwood for bein' a fightin' man, ain't you? Yes, and you're a one hell of a fightin' man, ain't you? Maybe you can handle a bunch of them dudes up there, but when it comes to men with hair on their backs you're a baby. Yes, an' if I done right by you I'd take a feather piller and bat your brains out and give 'em to the cat!"

Sawyer's friends laughed. The great savage waddled a little nearer Texas, shoving his mean face forward.

"I never seen a man from Texas in my life that I couldn't run out of the country with a ellum switch. They ain't got no fight in 'em lessen they's a bunch of them together. Them's the kind of fellers that lets the dog lick the clabber off of their faces and calls it a shave—they ain't got the stren'th in 'em to raise hair on their faces like a man. Yes, and if you don't take off that dam' gun

I'll pick you up with it on you and hold you out till you wiggle yourself to death, you dam' leather-bellied horny rattler!"

Texas unbelted his gun and handed it to Duncan. Then he stepped forward before anybody guessed his next move, and slapped Sawyer in the leering, red, hairy face.

Hartwell's hand was big and hard, and there was vigor in the blow, for he gave it for the honor of Texas and her men, and the traditions of their noble sacrifices and splendid courage. It made the cow-man's teeth pop, and sent him winding up against the wall of his comrades.

Sawyer came at Hartwell with his head down, like a bull, his arms reaching to grapple. There was no science on either side of that combat, but there was a great deal of main strength and awkwardness, and a grunting and snorting from Sawyer like a grizzly bear. Hartwell avoided his first rush and struck him in the face, drawing blood.

Texas was unloading from his mind and conscience all the hard things which had grown up in him during those days of suspicion and accusation. He was fighting not only Sawyer, but the Cattle Raisers' Association, and every blow that he struck was for his honor and the lightening of his heart. It was better to die fighting than to live disgraced.

That thought was uppermost in the whirl of his blinding emotions of vindication and vengeance, hot anger and desperation.

He was overmatched by fifty pounds, and Sawyer was fighting with the tools which he knew best how to use. The one advantage that Hartwell had was his shiftiness of foot, which kept him out of Sawyer's rib-crushing arms. Up and down the ring of men they surged and slashed, blows falling on both sides, blood streaming from faces, from gashed knuckles, the rim of onlookers widening and contracting to accommodate the fury of the clash.

As the combat lengthened and the punishment that each received increased, their fury grew. Caution was no longer a part of either man's policy. They met hand to hand, bent, panted, gasped, dripping blood. Hartwell had got a blow that nearly closed his right eye. His face was cut, his nose and lips were swollen, his mouth was full of blood.

He did not know what damage Sawyer had suffered, but it seemed that his fists fell on the cowman's hard body with little effect. Sawyer cursed him and insulted him with every vile name that was a challenge on the range, and surged at him in his roaring charges, at last planting a blow that sent Hartwell spinning and stretched him on his back. The cowman would have followed up this

advantage by throwing himself upon his fallen opponent's body and beating him unconscious as he stretched, for that was all included in the grapple-and-bite tactics of range encounters. But Duncan stretched out his arms and held him back.

"Have you got enough of it?" Duncan asked, as Texas immediately scrambled to his feet.

Hartwell's head was whirling, there was a sickness in the pit of his stomach, such a sickness that it seemed to reach every nerve of his body and make him weak. He shook himself like a dog coming out of the water, and bent his will to overcome this sickness which was making his senses dim.

"No," he said.

Duncan stepped from between them. Sawyer, reserving his filthiest and most slanderous epithet for the last, hurled it at Texas like a handful of effluvium. If anything had been needed in excess of his unbroken will to brace Texas, this name would have served. Instead of waiting for Sawyer to charge, Texas sprang and grappled him.

A new strength was in him, a fresh clearness had come over his senses which was as steadying as a cool hand on his head. As he had seized the horse on the fair grounds at Cottonwood he laid hold of Sawyer, unfeeling of his blows and kicks. The cowman's neck cracked as Hartwell closed with

him, bent him backward, lifted him, flung him a clean back somersault and left him sprawled senseless, his face to the ground.

A gasp of astonishment, not unblended with admiration, greeted this feat of strength. The onlookers stood back from Sawyer as men avoid a dead body, no man offering a hand to lift him.

Hartwell had lost his hat. He looked around for it, his head swimming, his forehead throbbing as if he had been hammered with a maul. One eye was so swollen that he could see through only a slit, the other misty from blood that ran into it from some injury in his bruised forehead.

Somebody came forward with the hat and gave it to him, silently. Duncan held out the belt with the big dangling gun. Hartwell girded himself with it again, put on his hat, although it seemed to stand ridiculously small on top of the great enlargement that he imagined his head had undergone, faced about, and walked away. He said no word to anybody; not one of them said a word to him. His way led him past the spot where Sawyer had fallen, his face in the mud of the trampled road.

Hartwell's after-recollection of the short walk from the battle-ground to the creek was as if he had risen in delirium from a bed of pain and gone wandering. It seemed a long distance to him, and that terrible deep sickness was over him again, as if

from an internal hemorrhage that gorged his vitals with blood.

Instinctively he must have concealed himself in the thick willows, for he had no recollection of it afterward. But on waking when the day was almost spent he found himself there, bruised, cut, bloody, and weak. His first thought was that his nickname had been the cause of all this misadventure and misery. If he had come into the Kansas range as Jim Hartwell, things never would have clouded up so suspiciously in men's minds. The pride that he had in that name "Texas" was like all vanities, he reflected; a thing to bring its possessor soon or late to humiliation and pain. Better to have been common Jim, with a whole hide and a good report, than picturesque Texas, beaten refugee, outcast of his kind, distrusted of men.

With these bitter reflections he turned his face toward Cottonwood, twenty miles away. And it was hard walking on Uncle Boley Drumgoole's high heels, a sore road and a long, weary one. It was almost noon of the next day when he arrived at the Woodbine Hotel, a grim, bruised figure, weak and sick.

A man was sitting on the bench beside the door, a cowboy in goatskin chaparejos with the long white hair on them. He rose and blocked the door with a long arm, an envelope in his hand.

"Duncan sent you this," he said.

Texas was ashamed of his battered face and bloody garments. He turned his back to the cowboy as he opened the letter. It contained seventy dollars in bills, but no word of writing, nothing at all but the money. Seventy dollars was the sum due him for his little more than three weeks' work at eighty dollars a month. Duncan had figured it liberally, and Texas knew that the big cattleman had relented a bit toward him, even to the extent of again allowing him the benefit of the doubt. There was a little cheer in this reflection. But very little.

"And Dee Winch sent you this," said the cowboy, reaching out his long arm again.

In the palm of his hand lay a loaded cartridge of large caliber. Texas looked from it to the messenger's face for further information.

"Winch told me to say to you if you ain't gone out of this country by the time they finish roundin' up them Texas cattle, he'll make you swaller six of these the first time he sets eyes on you."

Texas took the cartridge, turned it a moment in his fingers, his head bent in his peculiar pose of deep concentration. Then he flipped it into the street as he had flipped the worthless match.

"Tell him I'll be right here."

Hartwell's tone was gently courteous, as if he accepted some pleasant engagement. The cowboy heard him in wonder, and looked after him with strange respect as he entered the office of the green hotel.

CHAPTER XIV

HARTWELL LISTENS

OLLIE NOGGLE was clever at reducing swellings and easing the pain of abrasions, from his long practice at that subsidiary art in a land where violence was the rule. After he had gone over Texas Hartwell's face with his razor, and his lumps and bumps, cuts and bruises with his lotions and sweet-scented powders, there was little trace of damage to be seen.

That was one advantage of having a bony face, he remarked, ingenuously, as he worked on the hurts. A man like Hartwell could stand up to a lot of pounding and skinning, and get out of Noggle's chair just about the same as ever. But every barber couldn't do that for a man, hard face or soft face, he allowed. No, sir, it took an artist to make a job of it that a man could go to church with and not feel ashamed.

Hartwell owned that it took an artist, indeed, and that Mr. Noggle was the premier of his craft. He left the shop with confidence, and walked the street without shame. He had not ventured to place himself in Mr. Noggle's hands until after dark, for his

weakness and sickness had hung on him all afternoon, in spite of Mrs. Goodloe's motherly efforts to alleviate his suffering and lift the cloud from his spirits.

He told her, openly and without reservation, exactly what he had gone through, and the sincerity with which she expressed herself of her belief in his honesty was worth more to him than all the physic and balm that a medicine chest would hold.

To add to this comfort Malvina came to his room and put her hand on his forehead, and said she knew the association men were wrong in the matter, and that she would take his part against the whole range, just as he had walked into the room where the infare supper was going on and taken her part against the outrageous claims of Zebedee Smith.

Hartwell thanked her, and the pain and sickness —for a great deal of it was homesickness and loneliness—began to grow lighter at once, and the beauty to come back to the edges of the world. And Mrs. Goodloe brought him chicken broth, and sat by him while he drank it, and put a wet towel over his eyes, and he fell asleep. It was on her recommendation when he woke after sunset that he went to the light-handed Mr. Noggle and besought his ministrations.

Sympathy and food, though both of them were just the plain, common and wholesome kind with-

out spice or garnishment to whet the vanity, brought about a quick and brightening change. Texas was almost himself when he started to visit Uncle Boley after supper, clothed in new raiment, his grand black coat coming down on his thighs. As for the suspicion of the association, it troubled him little now. Duncan's adjustment of vision after the fight lent hope that all of them would see him right in time. But there was the challenge from Dee Winch, who felt himself aggrieved because he had hired Texas into the trust that they thought he had betrayed. Winch was not big enough to stand back and look at it like the generous man that Texas had taken him to be. His mind and sympathy were as inelastic as the dried beef upon which he lived, and his heart was atrophied like a chunk of it hanging in the smoke. His threat haunted Hartwell like a whisper in his ears. It would not leave him; he was conscious of it every breath.

He found that the story of his supposed treason had gone to Uncle Boley's shop ahead of him, and all over the town, in fact.

"Yes, they're cussin' you high and low, Texas, wherever they're got interest in cattle, one way or another, for this is a cow town, as I told you before," the old man said.

Uncle Boley sat looking out of his window—he was at work on a special rush job when Texas en-

tered—his waxed end hanging down his beard, his attention off the boot in the strap.

Texas thought that he avoided him with his eyes, and felt the hurt of that distrust more than he had suffered from Sawyer's fists. He believed the old man was going to repudiate him, afraid of the cattlemen's censure for having been his sponsor in a way. He could not blame Uncle Boley for that. Above all the others he had a reason—the reason of his butter and bread, his bed, his humble roof. If they should take their patronage away from him, all would fail.

"But let 'em cuss and be damned—I'll stand by you!" said Uncle Boley, with great and sudden vehemence. He whacked the bench with his hammer, a flush of defiance in his face, the light of a fight in his eyes.

Texas was taken around so suddenly by this declaration that he had no wind for a moment. And then when his wind came back, he hadn't any words, he was so chocked up with the big feeling of gratitude and admiration which rose up in him for this brave, honest old man. He went around the end of the little counter and gave Uncle Boley his hand, and looked him in the eye what men do not say to each other in times like that.

"That's all right, gol dern 'em!" said Uncle Boley. "I knew some of them fellers when they

was stealin' calves, and I can tell more'n one of 'em how they got their start. Let 'em come to me, gol dern 'em, and I'll put a cuckle burr under their tails that'll make them twist forty ways a minute!"

Texas was moved the deeper by this expression of faith and loyalty because it had come from Uncle Boley's tongue before he had heard Hartwell's side of it. Now he sat down near his ancient friend as he plied his thread, and told of his adventures with the invading cattlemen, sparing nothing, not even the visit of Fannie Goodnight to the border, and her part in his capture and disgrace. He believed that it was due to Uncle Boley to know all this, even though the figuring of Fannie Goodnight in it might place him in a more unenviable situation. Uncle Boley worked on in silence a little while, according to his way when pondering a heavy matter. Then:

"Do you reckon that girl was on the square, Texas?"

"I think she was, sir."

"But you know how a woman can act up, Texas. She can throw it all over a man when it comes to actin' up. But that feller a cussin' her seems to carry out her word that she tried to tip it off to you and spoke too late."

"I've turned it in my mind from all sides, Uncle

Boley, and I'm of the belief that she tried to do the square thing after she got to thinkin' it over, but spoke too late, sir, as you say."

He said nothing about Fannie's earnest declaration of the length she would go for him, nor of the liking that she had so openly expressed. No matter what she was, or had been in her day, she was sincere when she told him that, her hand on his arm, her eyes and voice as earnest as a woman's ever were.

No matter what she was, or had been in her day, indeed, there was an untainted spot in the core of her heart, and an upreaching and a yearning to have better than the world had given her, or her own wilful choice had brought. That much would keep between Fannie Goodnight and him. He asked Uncle Boley to hold her name out of it, as a mark of gratitude. The old man readily saw it in that light, and assented.

"We'll set our pegs and see how things turn out," Uncle Boley said. "If Duncan's beginnin' to see through a chink, that's a good sign he's comin' around to your side. Winch—he'll be the hardest snag in the road. You can't argue with that man. If you meet him, Texas, don't wait the bat of your eye—let him have it, right in the gizzard. Yes, and if I have to take a hand I'll take it, by granger!

I've been a good friend to Dee, and I've stood by him, but I ain't a goin' to set around and see him sling no gun on you."

"I don't want to have any more brawls and disturbances while I'm here, either, but I can't run away from that little man. And I ain't *got* any particular business right around here any more, Uncle Boley, but I couldn't look at even myself in the glass if I was to let him drive me off thataway."

"You ain't got no business around here, heh?" Uncle Boley spoke almost derisively, he put so much force into his words. He pulled at his threads as if he was out of humor with the boot, and wanted to hurt it. "Well, Sallie McCoy she's stopped in here every blessed day since she come back from Duncan's askin' me if I got any word from you. Nothing to stay around for, heh? Well, if I had half that much to stay around for anywhere, they couldn't drive me out of the country with dogs."

"I'm proud to know she took such a kindly interust in a stranger, sir. Do you suppose she'll think I'm a crook when she hears about this?"

"It takes more than rumors and suspicions to turn Sallie McCoy agin a friend."

"But I'm scarcely so near *to* her as a friend, sir. An acquaintance, a man passed by in the big road; that is all, sir."

"Of course, if you don't want to *be* no more than that!"

"I do want to be more than that, I'm pinin' and pindlin' away to be more than that, Uncle Boley, sir. But I couldn't approach her under any false pretenses, or under present unfortunate conditions. I'm a footless wayfarer, Uncle Boley; I have no place to lay my head. Here to-day, away to-morrow, like a bird on the wing, a pore old ornery crow-bird, sir, that's sailed off by the wind ever' whichway, and no place to light at all, and call it home."

"Then it's time you was makin' a home, and puttin' somebody in it to look after it, by granger! It makes me mad to hear a young feller with the daylight of his life ahead of him growlin' about havin' no place to light. What does a man need but a woman, and what does a woman need but a man?"

Uncle Boley's exposition of the simplicity of life drew that glimmering smile into Hartwell's eyes, and broke the stern corners of his mouth.

"Well sir, a house to live in, and something to eat, I reckon, ahead of most everything else," he ventured to reply.

"He'd be a dam' pore stick of furniture if he couldn't git 'em!"

"And I suppose there'd be a fire needed to keep

them warm, and coal-oil for the lamp," pursued Texas, his smile broadening until a little glint of his marvelously white teeth could be seen.

"Yes, and if he had a pair of eyes like Sallie McCoy's aside of him he'd have a light to cheer him through the darkest night that ever set, and he'd have a fire in her heart that'd warm him if death was a standin' over agin the wall. Tell me!"

"He would, sir," said Texas, very softly, his eyes fixed as one who saw a vision, "he would so, as sure as you're born!"

"Then why in the dickens don't you take her?"

"Why, she wouldn't have me, sir—she wouldn't *begin* to have me!"

Texas reduced himself, and emphasized his unworthiness so sharply that he seemed nothing but a point.

"How do you know?"

"She's a noblewoman, sir, one of the Almighty's royalty! The ground she walks on—"

"Is like any other ground—muddy or dry, 'cordin' to the weather. All you got to do, Texas, is spraddle out and throw a ham into it, like you're able if you set your jaw to a thing. Take a holt of something in this town that'll make you money—you don't have to wait till you get a gripsack full of it to ask Sallie to have you; she's the kind that'd be a help to any man."

"I'm most certain she would, sir. But a man couldn't ask her to meet greater hardships than she'd leave at home, maybe. And I'd be as keen as a bee in the early mornin' to start up in something here, Uncle Boley, if I knew what to turn to and had the means."

"Can you run a drug store?"

"I don't even know what it is they keep in 'em that makes that purty smell, sir."

"H-m; that's too bad. I knowed a feller run a drug store down in Kansas City, and he cleared more than he took in. It's the finest business a man ever opened, if he knows how to run it. I don't reckon you was brought up to doctorin' or lawyerin', was you Texas?"

"No sir, I wasn't, it grieves me to say, Uncle Boley."

Uncle Boley sewed on until he had used up his thread, then he took the boot out of the strap and stood it on the floor with reflective preoccupation. He was silent a good while, Texas watching him with the candle of humor in his eyes, his face softened in its homely austerity by the affection that he held for this simple, garrulous old soul.

"Well, I'll think out something for you, son," Uncle Boley said at last. "You go on ahead and fix that part of it up with Sallie, and by the time you're ready I'll have some plan figgered out if you

don't hit on one you like better yourself. Maybe we'll make it a double weddin'."

Uncle Boley winked, in his quick and devilish way, and jerked his head triumphantly in the manner of a man who knows that he is uncovering an astonishing surprise.

"You don't tell me! I congratulate you, sir, and I doubly congratulate the lady, whoever she may be."

Uncle Boley's face wore a cast of high importance as he went to his little counter and opened the drawer. He took from it a photograph, which he passed to Texas.

"She's comin' down from Topeky in a week or two. She wants to see how fur I can jump."

The picture was of a woman past her prime, a long-necked woman, thin of features, ringlets of heavy hair on her shoulders. She was gaily dressed, in a vogue long past, with tight sleeves and little upstanding pokes on the shoulders. There were a good many flowers about her, and much jewelry. Her eyes were hollow, her cheeks sad, as if she had wept the passing of many men.

The photograph was old, and Texas knew it at once for one of those curios which came from the tents of traveling photographers when the art was in the infancy of the dry plate.

"This is the lady you mentioned to me one time, sir?"

Texas wanted to show interest, a polite, if not a deep interest, although the humor of Uncle Boley's romance was one of the hardest things to bear that he ever had met.

"That's Gertie Moorehead," Uncle Boley said, very proud of her, and very proud of himself for getting on the road of winning her to his hoary bosom.

"I wish you much joy," said Texas, in the quaint words of congratulation with which they still greet bridal people in certain remote corners of this wide land.

"She'll be down," Uncle Boley took the picture, held if off at arm's length, studied it with romantic softness in his eyes, "to look me over and talk it up between us. If she's suited, we'll hitch. It never was good for a man to be alone, and it never will be. The longer he's alone the worse it gits."

"Yes, sir, I guess it must, sir."

"I can take care of a woman, I ain't none of your old used-up stiffs. I'm a better man than many a one of forty-seven I could step out of that door and lay my hands on!"

"Yes, and a sight better than some of them at *thirty*-seven, I'll bet you a purty, sir."

"Well, I ain't crowin' over nobody in petic'lar, but I've took care of myself. You'll be stayin' down at Malvina's, will you?"

"I've sent word to Mr. Winch that I'm to be found there."

Uncle Boley's manner of assurance and sprightliness fell from him at the mention of Winch. He became at once serious and silent, as if the overhanging threat pressed upon his heart.

"Yes, and if he gits you, Texas, I'll stoop down and I'll pick up your gun, and I'll foller him to the rim of daylight but what I put a bullet in his heart!"

Texas lifted his head with a new feeling of pride, and looked the old man straight in the bright, blue eyes.

"It means a great deal to a man to have a friend who will go that far for him, Uncle Boley, sir!"

Texas went away from Uncle Boley's shop feeling unaccountably lonely in spite of the evidence of confidence and affection that the old man had shown. He could not put the shadow of Dee Winch's threat against his life out of his mind. More than once in the passage between shop and hotel he caught himself unconsciously watching from side to side, unconsciously straining for the sound of a footstep behind him.

It was a disquieting thing to live with a sentence

of death hanging over one's head that way. He was free to walk in the light or the dark with other men, and to pursue the business of his life in the accustomed trend, but he could not be free from the heavy dread of the sudden meeting, the flash of arms, somebody reeling in the road, his gun dropped at his feet. That was a demand note which Dee Winch had taken from him; it must be paid upon presentation.

Even in his room he could not find the relaxation that is due a man without an uncommon care. This thing hung over him, placed him in a vacuum, it seemed, through which the sound of other men's activities came but dimly, and as of things secondary to his own important strait.

It had come between him and all his planning, it stood in the foreground cutting off all view an arm's length beyond. Over his spirits it was as heavy as a debasing drug; in his thoughts it obtruded constantly, like the nagging tone of a hateful voice. The alertness of the hunted was in every nerve; caution had become exaggerated into a pain. There could be no rest, there could be no moment of relaxation for his strained faculties until this thing had been met and finished.

Hartwell had become a listening man.

CHAPTER XV

THE BANJO NOTE

HARTWELL was not without offers of employment next day. Malvina wanted to put him in as night clerk in her office, a place created out of her generosity for the sole purpose of offering it to him. Not that a night clerk was not needed in the Woodbine Hotel, indeed, for people came in at all hours, many of them boisterous, more of them sullen and red-eyed and mean from liquor and losses at the gambling joints.

But Texas refused it with grateful expressions, only to be waited on a little while later by Jud Springer, the gambler whose house had been closed by the mayor's one-sided application of his own law. Springer had come back with three quick-handed friends behind him, and was planning to reopen his place that night. He wanted to put Texas in as chief of his squad, and offered big inducements in in the remunerative way.

This offer Texas also was obliged to put behind him, with such modest discount of his competency as to lift him to the pinnacle of the gambler's respect. He had no intention of taking sides with

any faction in Cottonwood, nor of arranging himself against the law, farcical as it might be.

It was a question with him what to do, indeed. His money would soon waste away, even at the very moderate rate for lodging and board which Malvina had made in his case. Something would have to be set going shortly.

He could not leave there to seek employment, for he had passed his word to Winch. That appointment was an obligation. To run away from it would be equal to the repudiation of debt. It would follow a man, and cling to him like a taint; he never could lift up his head in honorable company again.

So there he would stay until Dee Winch came, and this matter was finished for all time. There would be no other way of easing the strain of listening, as wearing on a man to bear as a contracted muscle for which there was no relief. One way or another their meeting in the streets of Cottonwood would end this thing.

He was resentful in his mental attitude toward Winch. A man had no right arbitrarily to throw another under the necessity of defending his life on any such groundless pretext. It appeared to him that it was a forced excuse for Winch to ease for another week or month the blood thirst that had fallen on him like some unholy disease. He did

not want to kill Winch; in his heart there was not one shadow against the man that would justify the thought. But he was determined fully to act according to Uncle Boley's advice. If Winch should beat him to his gun when they met, he would have to move faster than a snake.

It was late in the afternoon of the day after his arrival at Cottonwood from the range that Hartwell met Sallie McCoy at Uncle Boley's shop. She was just leaving; the old man had quit his bench to attend her with ceremonious courtesy to the door.

"Talk of the devil!" said Uncle Boley.

"Oh, Uncle Boley!" she protested, while a warm, soft flush drowned her face, and a smile leaped in her eyes like the fire of a home-hearth as she gave Hartwell her hand.

"I mighty proud to see you, Miss McCoy."

Hartwell bent over her hand in his quaint, old cavalier way. He was not wearing his long coat that day; the great heavy revolver that Ed McCoy had carried to his death hung on his thigh like a sword.

"Well, if he ain't the devil he's blood related to him, accordin' to these cow-men around here," Uncle Boley said.

"You surely would think so, sir."

"Not all of us—even cow-men," she assured him,

laving him for a moment in the cool of her clear brown eyes.

"You are a host on my side, Miss McCoy."

"Yes, and you're a stoppin' my door up so the air can't blow in on me," Uncle Boley complained, with a great comical exaggeration of injury and pretense of suffocation. "Git out of here and do your talkin' and passin' compliments, you two young sky-looters!"

He shooed them out like chickens, chuckling in his beard, and watched them as they went off together in the slant sunlight of the autumn day.

Sallie was on her way to gather goldenrod, she said, to adorn her room at school. It grew abundantly by the roadside everywhere, but it was better just out of town, away from the dust of wheels and hoofs. Yes, he might go if he wished; he would be useful to help carry it, for she meant to gather a great deal, oh, an immense amount of it, indeed.

The world was full of gold that day, of black-eyed Susans wearing bonnets of it, of sunflowers blooming late, destined to fall before the frost, and goldenrod in banks and wide stretches over the wild meadowlands. For it is the way of nature on the Kansas plains to send springtime white-garlanded, like a bride, and autumn splendid in a golden cope, like a luxurious bishop come to give benediction on the summer labors of men.

They worked like gleaners in the ancient fields, freighting themselves with flowers, and what the moonlight had begun that night when they sat under the cottonwood at Duncan's ranch, the gold of this autumn evening brought to completion and welded so fast into his heart that Texas knew it never could come away. He must prepare the ways of life thenceforward for two; the road leading away from Cottonwood seemed so remote that his feet never would find it any more.

There was a great deal to be said, a good many sighs to be spent on both sides, about the business of gathering two armfuls of goldenrod, it seemed. Perhaps hearts out of which sentiment had dried, such as florists' hearts, would not have found it a long task nor a particular one in that field of abundant bloom, but it was nearing sundown when Sallie and Hartwell turned their faces again toward the town. The schoolhouse was on the way to Sallie's home, and there they were to leave the flowers. Early in the morning she would go and arrange them along the bleak walls of her room.

Never before in his life had Texas Hartwell gone carrying a sheaf of yellow flowers beside a lady. It was a rare day, indeed, an occasion of great pride. Children came smiling to greet their teacher, little girls skipped beside her, turning up

adoring eyes. There was room for all of them in her heart, along with him, Hartwell knew; room indeed for the whole world without crowding him and causing him one jealous pain.

"There's Mr. Stroud," said Sallie, as they approached the schoolhouse, "the principal of our school—my boss. I'd like you to meet him."

"I'll be proud to," Texas declared.

Stroud was locking the front door of the white-painted, churchlike building in which he presided over the mental discipline of Cottonwood's youth. Hartwell saw that he was a tall, harsh-jointed man, surly of look, ram-faced, a dusting of white in his heavy, rough black hair. He looked around at them as he put the key in his pocket, a frown on his sour face, turned, and hurried off the other way, giving Sallie no chance to present her friend.

"He doesn't seem to be inclined to make my acquaintance, Miss Sallie," said Hartwell, feeling the cut deeply.

"Mr. Stroud is a peculiar man," she excused, flushing in humiliation for the necessity of making apology for the schoolmaster's boorish behavior.

"It galls a man to be in public disfavor to the depth that I have fallen, Miss Sallie; it hurts like saw-grass on the naked skin."

"I know it does, Mr. Hartwell, but as long as

—some of us believe in you, and your conscience is clear, you can hold your head up in spite of their prejudice."

"As long as you believe in me, Miss Sallie, I can feel the clouds scrape my hair."

He waited outside while she unlocked the door and left her burden of blooms in her room, and not until he had parted from her at her own gate was he conscious again of the listening strain for the unheard footfall at his back. That phantom had left him for a little while in what seemed to him her holy presence. Now it had returned in aggravation, as if to impress upon him the fatuity of planning any felicitous thing for his future days.

There could be no peace, there could be no planning, indeed, until the day of reckoning between him and Dee Winch. Until that day he must walk with his life in pawn, with no right to love and inspire love, no right to plan and build and hope like other men. With his faculties centered on the invisible thing behind him, ready to wheel and fire at the first sound of that threatening step, he must walk the earth a listening man.

Moodily he walked the streets after supper that evening, turning in his mind many things. His heart urged him to the presence of Sallie McCoy, where he knew he should find welcome and the comfort of faith, but his honor held him back.

Crowds which seemed to have sprung from the ground like grasshoppers were out, the din of the musicians in the two rival dance halls was shrieking into the night. All was animation, with the flush of the night's first potations on the cheeks of men who would grow ugly and quarrelsome as the accumulated poison struck deeper and the polluted night wore on.

Texas wondered how many men among them walked with their trailing shadows like him on the streets of Cottonwood that night. Many were there who had taken human life, against whom accounts remained to be balanced by law or kindred or friend. And there was growing at that hour trouble which probably would result in more shooting and slaying before many days.

Jud Springer had defied the mayor and opened his place, with an imported band which, in volume of sound at least, was ahead of anything that Cottonwood had ever heard. Business was going to his doors, for the lights were bright, and the shoulders of women gleamed under them like insidious flowers.

Hartwell wondered what had become of Fannie Goodnight, the glimpse of those half-naked women having brought her sharply into his mind. There must have been a good deal of that kind of life in Fannie Goodnight's experience, he believed, for the

sight of those women immediately to suggest her. Whether she had put it behind her and opened a new account, of course he did not know. One way or another she seemed to have put something between her and her past, or the worst of her past.

He felt that he owed Fannie a friendly turn if it ever should come his way to pay it, for he was convinced that the good in her had moved her to warn him that night at the peril of hard usage for herself. He doubted if they should ever meet again, for it was likely that those who had used her to entrap him had sent her away from that country, distrustful of her for any future employment in their schemes.

Mrs. Goodloe was in the hotel office knitting a necktie of scarlet silk when he returned from his aimless rambling. She held the finished portion of it up to Hartwell's view and admiration.

"It's for Ollie's birthday," she said. "Do you think it'll become him?"

"It will make him look like a prince, ma'am," he assured her, with entire gravity.

Mentally he pictured the flaming adornment over Mr. Noggle's pea-green shirt, beneath his salmon-like, shallow chin. He surely would be a figure to fascinate the female eye when he stepped out arrayed in that ardent example of his mother-in-law's art.

"Ollie's a good boy, he treats Malvina like a perfect lady. She never knew what it was to have a man that'd take his hat off to her when he meets her in the street, just like she didn't belong to him, till she married Mr. Noggle."

Mrs. Goodloe was so touched by the courteous behavior of the barber that her voice shook with tenderness. Texas understood very well what such consideration meant to women whose lives had been as barren as Mrs. Goodloe's and Malvina's. His respect for the barber rose a little, in spite of his trade.

"Mr. Noggle is a gentleman, ma'am. Any man could tell that the minute he met him in the road."

"Yes, he is, Mr. Hartwell. He ain't much of a man for a fight, I don't reckon, till he's crowded to it, but all men ain't alike that way. You take Zeb Smith; he was always ready to knock somebody down, specially his wife. He never laid a hand on me, though, the ornery old houn'!"

"I'll just bet you a purty he never, ma'am!"

"No, and if he had I'd 'a' scalded him to the bone! I'd 'a' put a spider in his coffee if he'd 'a' been my old man, long before he ever took that cowardly sneak off to the Nation."

"He sure deserved two of 'em, ma'am. That man's got a breachy eye."

"He's as sneaky as a snake."

"I'll bet a purty he is."

"If you had all the horses together that man's stole they'd load a car."

"You don't tell me!"

"Yes, and cattle, too."

"Cattle, ma'am!"

"Millions of 'em. If he got a year for ever' one of 'em he'd be in the pen when Gabr'l blows his horn. Did you know he come sneaking around here as soon as he heard you'd left?"

"No ma'am, I didn't hear of it. Did he do any damage?"

"He didn't come here to the house, but he's back in town, workin' for Johnnie Mackey."

"What might that old scoun'rel be doin' for Mackey, ma'am?"

"Bouncerin'. He goes on at ten or 'leven and works till the crowds clear out. They don't know him very well here now, for this was only a new starter of a town when he left, and most of them fellers has come in since. He looks fierce, and he's mean. I guess he'll hold the job. Zeb's trick is to hit a man when he ain't expectin' it and lay him out—that's *his* way."

"He sure is a mean-lookin' man, ma'am."

"Yes, and Ollie's so nervous over him bein' in town he don't hardly dare to go to and from the shop. He's been thinkin' of movin' down here to

the hotel, but it wouldn't be as good. He'd lose trade by it, for he's centered where he is, and I tell him to buckle a gun on him and stick to it."

"That's the right advice, ma'am."

But advice which would profit Ollie Noggle nothing, and Texas knew it very well. He could imagine the barber's discomfort with that old sandstone savage hanging in the background like a threat.

"I and Malvina—we was just a talkin' a little while ago and sayin' that it would be a good thing for Ollie if him and you was to go pardners in the shop."

"Me, ma'am? Why, I never barbered nothin' in my life but a mule!"

"Not to do barberin', I don't mean, but just to kind of stay around and draw the line for Smith, and walk to and from the shop with Ollie."

"I can do that without bein' a pardner, ma'am, if it would help Ollie any, and I'd be proud."

"It would—it'd be the biggest help a man ever give another. That poor boy's up there at the shop right now, late as it is, waitin' for me or Malvina to come after him, and I'll bet he's sweatin' and trimblin' in every limb. Malvina's afraid to go over after him alone for fear of runnin' acrost Zeb, and both of us can't leave here. If this keeps on I'll load up a gun and drive that scalawag away from here myself!"

"I'll go right up to the shop, ma'am, and fetch him home."

Texas had to hurry out of her presence, her volley of thanks at his back for the provocation of laughter was greater that minute than at any time since he came to Cottonwood. In his imagination he could see Noggle's long narrow face at the door of his little shop, the sweat of his anxiety like the distillation of his precious ambergris on his brow.

It was a terrible thing for a man to be a coward like that, especially when the subject of his aversion was so unworthy as Zeb Smith. Still, it was a pity that Smith, the old ruffian, should be allowed to give the simple-hearted Malvina so much distress. The old rooster ought to be run out of town, and Texas had half a mind to go to him and serve notice. But that would be putting himself up before the public in the light of a bad man, and it was a distinction that he did not court.

Noggle was a greatly relieved man when Texas stepped into his shop. He was so grateful that he capered about in light little prancings for his hat, his seersucker coat, his umbrella, and his gloves. Noggle never appeared on the street, by night or by day, without his gloves, if not on his hands, then held elegantly in one of them as if he had just taken them off.

Now, as he walked beside Texas, turning fearful glances this way and that for the terrible form of Zeb Smith, he made a very fashionable figure indeed, for all his fear. His hat was small and soft, of a dove-gray, pinched together at the crown like a tomato can that had been run over by a wagon wheel. It sat high on his curly hair, a little to one side, leaving free an abundant fluffy lock of that adornment to fall upon his left eyebrow. His trousers were light, and tight on his long, thin legs; perfume floated after him; his very presence proclaimed his trade.

In a little while he put aside his fear, for he was as simple in his trust as he was poor in valor, and walked beside Texas with the confidence of a child whose mother has come to convoy it home from school through the perils of street barbarians. Their way led past Johnnie Mackey's wide-open door. There was no other route to the hotel, except one that would have been roundabout, dark, and undignified to follow. Noggle seemed to have a sort of desperate satisfaction in passing the lair of his enemy.

Zeb Smith was standing in the door. Noggle did not see him among all who came and went through that gaping portal until it was too late to draw back, although Texas had picked him out

from afar. He must have looked as big as a church steeple to the barber, whose eyes began to grow as his jaw fell and his breath came short.

"There he is, there he is!" he whispered, shrinking behind his conductor. "You got your gun? Yes, oh, yes—you got it!"

Noggle sighed in the assurance and relief that the sight of the gun gave him, and Texas took him by the arm with firm grasp to hold him abreast and marched him so close up to Zeb Smith he could smell him. Smith came out to the sidewalk and glared fiercely on them as they passed under the bright lights.

"Huh! hired a nurse!" he scoffed.

Texas felt Noggle's flesh tremble under the sound of the rough taunting voice. Noggle could not have framed a word if his life depended on it, for his tongue was frozen against his teeth with fear, but Texas let go of his arm, turned and gave Smith a look that drove him like a kicked dog to the shelter of his door. His cur's courage returned to him there; he stood calling insults after them which drew laughter from the loungers at hand.

When they turned the corner the barber's breath began to go down as far as his first vest button again. He drew out his perfumed handkerchief from his breast pocket—where a corner of it was always displayed in the refinement of fashion and

the elegance of taste of which Noggle was the great exemplar—and wiped away the sweat of his agonizing fear.

"That feller'll go too fur one of these days!" he said.

"I think he's gone too far already," Texas allowed. "You could whip that man with one hand if you'd sail into him—why, I tell you he'd run so fast you never would be able to overtake him between here and the Nation."

Noggle looked back, and around him, to make certain that Smith had not followed nor cut across and headed them off.

"I'll do it, too! If I could ever git him in the shop for a shave I'd cut his throat clean down to his backbone!"

"I don't think he'll put his head in a trap thataway. You buy yourself a gun, and you wear it when you step out; then you march up to that man and slap his jaw and spraddle all over him like old folks. He'll beat time hittin' a streak out of this town, and I'll bet you a purty he will."

Noggle didn't warm up to the suggestion. Texas could see through him all around the edges; he hadn't any more heat in him than a hickory shad. He felt sorry for Malvina, for he knew that if there was any fighting to be done in that family she would have to do it, and he believed she would do

it if it came to pass where Zeb Smith ever ruffled a curl of Ollie's small, brainless head.

Ollie entered the hotel by a side door, and in his gratitude drew Texas in after him, where both of them were almost enveloped in Malvina's grateful embrace. Texas avoided her arms only by a quick withdrawal into the background, leaving the barber to bear it all alone.

Malvina cried a little, and declared that she thought he had been killed, which gave Ollie a lead for the announcement of his bloody intentions in regard to Zeb Smith. Malvina's cheeks paled on hearing this, and she clung to her new husband with trembling hands, for she knew that he was a sheep in his heart and a rabbit in his soul, but he was kind to her, and took off his hat when he met her on the street.

As for Texas, the valor of the barber in the house was not so diverting that moment as it might have been but for a circumstance that drew his attention toward the office, partly seen through the open door. A man had entered and saluted Mrs. Goodloe with friendly word, and was now selecting a cigar from the offering out of the showcase supporting the bell. His voice came into the room distinctly, and it was one that Texas would have known out of all the tumult of the earth.

There could not be two men afflicted with that

same, nosy, metallic, whanging voice. The man at the showcase was the one who had cursed Fannie Goodnight, and taunted him as he lay bound in the Texans' rawhide that night beside his supper fire.

Texas stepped to the door for a look at the man's face, but he had his cigar, and was going out to the street. He hastened to Mrs. Goodloe, eager in manner and voice, inquiring who her customer was.

"Why, that was Henry Stott, the banker. I thought you'd met Henry."

"I believe I have," said Texas grimly.

He stepped to the office door and looked after the banker as he passed down the street, the smoke of his cigar trailing after him. He was safe, he was anchored there, he wouldn't get away. And to-morrow there would be a reckoning between them.

So Stott was playing a double game against the cattlemen of that range. Doubtless the past three or four years of prosperity there had made loans slow, and the income from interest was not as brisk as it should have been. To make things merrier, Stott had gone back to his old trade of importing southern cattle, buying them with the funds of his depositors whose herds were now in peril.

If the cattlemen could be convinced of Stott's hand in bringing this danger to their herds, it would

be all day with the banker's future schemes in that country. He would be a lucky man, indeed, if he didn't stretch a lariat on somebody's up-ended wagon-tongue.

In the morning, Texas determined, his first business would be to hire a horse and ride to Duncan's, and lay the matter before the president of the Cattle Raisers' Association. For there could be no mistaking Stott; there could not be two men in the world, indeed, affected with voices such as his, and especially not in the small compass of Cottonwood and its tributary range.

But why wait for morning to go to Duncan's? The thought took hold of him with the eagerness of fire in dry grass. The desire to vindicate himself, and stand clean in the eyes of the men who had trusted him, was in his throat like a thirst. Duncan would return to Cottonwood with him; they could be there by the time Stott opened the bank in the morning.

Within half an hour Hartwell was on his way to Duncan's ranch, the cool night wind in his hot face as he galloped with free rein over the old cattle trail that led back into his native land.

CHAPTER XVI

DISCHARGED

TEXAS HARTWELL rode back to Cottonwood the next afternoon, a disappointed and humiliated man. Malcolm Duncan had listened to his charges involving Henry Stott with surprise which grew into incredulity, and at last broke in a storm of open scorn.

It was impossible that Stott could have had a hand in running the Texas cattle, Duncan said. He had known Stott for years, and had done business with him long enough to know that he was a square man, and above any such double-handed dealing as that charged.

"We'll let this go no further," said Duncan, as if doing Hartwell a great favor in burying the charges in his breast. "I wouldn't want to stand in your shoes if Henry ever hears of this."

Duncan went farther; he advised Hartwell to take the first train out of Cottonwood, no matter which way it was going. He was still giving Texas the benefit of the doubt that he held in his case, according to the basic justness of his mind.

Hartwell appreciated this half fairness, even

though he saw that his case was hopeless with the cattlemen. Fannie Goodnight's testimony, even though he might be able to bring her forward to speak in his behalf, would have no weight against the word of a man like Stott.

Fannie appeared to have dropped out of that part of the world. Since his return to Cottonwood Hartwell had kept a vain lookout for her. Of Stott's complicity he had not the faintest doubt. The banker was not only involved, but was the leading power in the venture of the Texas herd. But Hartwell was sick of the hopelessness of ever proving it, heavy with the depression that had been added to his already gloomy load.

Stott was bound to hear of his charge to Duncan, in spite of the cow-man's apparent generosity. When it came to the banker's ears he would be hot to silence the source of it. More gun-slingers would be set after Texas; awake and asleep he would strain and listen for their feet behind him. Truly, Duncan's advice to quit the country was kind counsel, but his going would be his conviction in the minds of the few who still believed in him there. He would not go under a cloud, not if all the gun-slingers on the Arkansas Valley range put his name down in their books of doom.

Uncle Boley was not working when Texas went to the shop to report on his absence and the cause

of it. The old man was sitting behind the counter in his chair, his empty bench before him, his tools lying where he had put them down, a partly finished boot standing on the floor. The only indication that Uncle Boley had any interest at all left in his business was the waxed-end which he held in his mouth, dark-trailing over his white beard.

"Well, Texas, you're back, and hell's to pay—hel-l's to pay!"

Uncle Boley was disturbed beyond anything in his carriage that Texas ever had witnessed. He got up, rather hurriedly, chewing on the thread as if he would bite it in two, shook his head, sighed. Texas was alarmed. He felt a coldness as of some approaching dread come over him as he hurried forward.

"What's the matter, Uncle Boley? What's happened, sir?"

"Hell's to pay and no pitch hot!" said Uncle Boley gloomily. "They've fired Sallie."

"Fired her? You don't tell me, sir! What reason in this world could they—"

"For bein' seen walkin' along the street with a feller called Texas Hartwell, the most suspicioned feller this side of No Man's Land."

"Can it be possible that I have brought this calamity to Miss Sallie, sir?"

Texas stood before the old man, his face blood-

less, his nostrils flaring as if he breathed acid. He was struck rigid by the news, a cold, deep fury in him that seemed to clog his blood.

"It's a fact, to the shame and disgrace of this town. She's fired, turned out like she was a strumpet in the street, and her the cleanest, purest little flower that ever kissed the wind."

"I've brought that on her! It was a woeful day, Uncle Boley, that I ever struck this town!"

"You ain't to blame, Texas; I know you're clean."

"But what will she think about me, sir?"

"I was to blame, more than either of you two—I sent you off together to pick them flowers. Stroud—he's at the bottom of it—he's been tryin' to marry Sallie two or three years, and him old enough to be her daddy twice."

"We saw the scoun'rel; he slunk away before we could speak to him, right at the schoolhouse door."

"Stroud must 'a' done it for revenge on Sallie. He took it up with Henry Stott, chairman of the board, and the other two members follered Stott's lead. Stott thought firin' her on your account would make him a little soldier with the cow-men."

"Let me tell you something about Stott, sir," Texas requested, his hand earnestly on the old man's shoulder. And there he told him of his discovery the night past, of his ride to Duncan's, and

of Duncan's angry refusal to entertain the charge.

Uncle Boley nodded now and then as Hartwell proceeded to the end.

"Stott's workin' to blacken you so deep nobody'll believe you. He don't want you to have any standin' at all in case you ever suspicion him and tell it. Firin' Sallie helps. It shows you up as a man with a curse ag'in' him that passes on to whosomever he touches."

Texas stood, shoulders up, his body stiff as iron, his eyes fixed in frowning glare on the street through the open door as the old man spoke. Now he turned suddenly, holding out his hand as if in farewell.

Lifting wondering eyes, Uncle Boley took it, and felt that it was as cold as the flesh of the dead.

"Uncle Boley, you've been a powerful good friend to me; you've stood by me when I was a kicked dog in the corner, and I'll carry the gratitude for it in the warmest place in my heart, sir, the longest day I live. If I don't happen to see you no more, sir, I want you to know that I wish you well, now and hereafter, for evermore."

"Why, in God's name, boy—why, Texas—what—what're you goin' to do?"

The old man clung to his hand, stroking it with his grease-black fingers, looking up at his young friend with frightened, appealing eyes.

"I'm a goin' to call that scoun'rel out, sir, and give him the chance for his life he doesn't deserve. I'm either a goin' to kill him or he'll kill me!"

"Stroud—do you mean Stroud?"

"I mean that polecat Stott, Uncle Boley. Him and me can't breathe together in this world one hour more."

"Wait a minute—wait a minute or two, Texas. Let me think this over—let me think it over, son."

Uncle Boley was pathetic in his perplexity. Tears came wandering down his beard; his hand shook as he clung to Hartwell to hold him back from the execution of his desperate resolution.

"Sir—"

"It wouldn't do any good to kill him—if you kill him you'll shut up the last mouth that can clear you, Texas—don't you see you will?"

"Uncle Boley, I'll make him sign a statement. There ain't no argument and no pleadin' under the sun can stop me in what I've set out to do."

Texas was gone before more could be said to delay him. Uncle Boley went to the door and looked after him, a score of wild schemes rising in his mind to hurry after him and prevent the tragedy, but each of them he dropped as quickly as it came to him, and stood silent and impotent while Texas rushed along the street toward the bank. The wrath of a patient man had broken its re-

straint; Uncle Boley knew that if he met Stott he would kill him, with no thought of future consequences to himself.

It was easy to follow Hartwell's progress along the street, for people fell out of his way as if he came carrying the contamination of a fatal disease. Those who did not know him, and had no reason to fear him for his notoriety, read in his face something that made them give him a wide road, and stand gazing after him to see where his wrath would fall. Uncle Boley groaned, believing that this was indeed the great day of trouble, as Hartwell disappeared in the bank.

Uncle Boley could not remain in the door any longer. He feared to see what was to follow; feared that he might be called upon to give testimony against Texas in the dread hour of his trial. There would be enough to do that without him, for people were pressing toward the bank, craning necks, crowding upon each other's heels, to see what this desperate man was about to do.

Uncle Boley could read in their excitement that they believed Texas was going to rob the bank, for some of them were running as if to summon help or arm themselves for the protection of their money in Henry Stott's safe. Uncle Boley turned from the door.

Back behind his counter he sat huddled, an old,

old man for the first time in his life, fearing to hear what he listened for, afraid of the rush in the street that would tell him the thing was done. A long time he listened, and grew dumb in his sickening anxiety. At last there came a step that he knew on the walk before his door, and a form in the frame of it that was dearer to him than he would have owned an hour ago. Texas was back, heavy of foot and weary.

"He went to Kansas City last night," he said.

Uncle Boley clasped his hands to his temples and bowed his head.

"Thank God!" he said.

So he sat, his white head bent, his calloused hands clasping his temples. Texas stood beside the counter, panting. His face was white as if only the ashes of his soul remained out of the fire of his anger.

"I can wait," he said.

Uncle Boley slowly lifted his head. There were tears on his beard again; a look of age such as he never had worn before made his face softly sad and gentle. He got up, reaching out his hand with the groping slowness of a blind man, touched Texas on the shoulder, ran his fingers down his arm as if to satisfy himself that Hartwell had indeed returned.

"Thank God!" he said again.

"He'll come back in a day or two, they said. I can wait."

"Yes, we can all wait," Uncle Boley said. "We can wait the Almighty's time to make straight the crooked paths and lead every man to his punishment and reward. I thank God that Henry Stott was gone! There was more than chance in it. Go and pump a fresh bucket of water, son, and take a good drink, and come back here and set down and cool off and take possession of your mind."

Texas did as the old man bade him. He put his hat down on the floor beside his heel when he came back and sat near Uncle Boley, his long black hair wild on his forehead, his face as gaunt as a man who had but one desire in him, and that a desire hot in his heart as molten iron.

Uncle Boley thought of ten reasons to base an argument on against killing Henry Stott, but he saw that none of them would be effective in Hartwell's present high state of strain and anger. Let him cool a night, and then reason it with him; that would be the plan. So Uncle Boley took up his work, making a show of being composed, and sewed on quite a spell with never a word.

"Have you seen Miss Sallie since this trouble happened to her, Uncle Boley?"

Texas appeared to be cooling off already. His

voice was steady, and it sounded like it came out of a reasonable man. But Uncle Boley saw that the fire of destruction still raged in his soul, for the reflection of it was glowing in his eyes.

"She stopped in here on her way home this morning, as broke up over it as a young bird that's been blowed out of its nest in a storm."

"Did she have much blame to lay on me, sir?"

"She didn't have one word of blame for you, Texas."

"But don't you reckon she must *feel* I'm a scoun'rel, Uncle Boley?"

"I don't recollect that she said any such a word."

"Everybody's down on me so in this country; all but you and one or two others, that I couldn't blame her. I've bungled things since I came to this place—I've stumbled around like a blind horse."

"Well, don't muss 'em up any worse from now on than you can help, son. You wasn't to blame for what's happened, only for lettin' that girl rope you in down there on the line that night, and I reckon I'd 'a' done the same thing if I'd 'a' been in your place, or most any man would."

"Yes, that was my one mistake," Texas admitted regretfully. "And I suspicioned something, all the time, too. But it's done now, sir, and regrets won't never set it straight. They come too late to do any good, just like that girl tryin' to warn me after them

fellers was standin' around me with their ropes in their hands."

"I want you to cool off on this business of Henry Stott, Texas, and in the morning we'll talk it over, ca'm and reasonable. No, don't up and tell me now what you're goin' to do when he comes back. A night makes a mighty big difference in a feller's plans sometimes—a difference as wide as the State of Kansas. You go along up and see Sallie after a while, and talk it over with her and her ma, and see what they think about it."

"Do you think Miss Sallie would care to see me, sir, after this disgrace I've fetched on her?"

"I'd run the resk if I was in your place."

Texas took up his hat, a look of eagerness in his eyes, a flush of color driving the pallor of his dying anger out of his face.

"I'll go right on up, sir; I've got a whole lot I want to say to her and explain. I aim to tell her what I've found out about Stott."

"I believe I'd wait till after supper," Uncle Boley suggested kindly, to cover the humiliation that lay in the caution, "till along after dark a little while."

Texas dropped his hat, the eager light flickered out of his eyes.

"Yes, I don't want to take any more trouble and disgrace to her door. I'll wait till after dark."

CHAPTER XVII

FRIENDS FOR ISHMAEL

MRS. McCOY received Texas in subdued severity. She was a tall, dark woman, proud and handsome, an aristocrat in every line of her body, every tradition of her past. She was as strangely out of place in Cottonwood as a fine vase would have been on Malvina Noggle's shelf among the thick, chipped china at the green hotel. But not more aristocratic, nor high and mighty in her bearing, that evening than Texas Hartwell, indeed. He had not come to that house as a penitent or a culprit seeking exculpation, but as a gentleman who was sure of himself, across whose conscience not a shadow fell. He came as a champion, to give his earnest pledge that he would see the wrongs righted for both Sallie and himself before he left that town.

This he hastened to tell Mrs. McCoy, standing in the hall, where his features were clouded in the light of the candle that she carried. She stood very erect and dignified, and heard him through his brief and earnest introduction without comment.

"Step inside, sir; I will light the lamp," she said,

indicating the open door of the living-room, the candle lifted shoulder-high as she studied his solemn face. She said no more until she had regulated the flame of the reading-lamp, which stood among disordered piles of books on the big library table as if a castle of them had fallen to ruin there.

"Miss McCoy cannot be seen, sir."

She seated herself, her face turned partly to the light, and looked across at Texas, unfriendly, hard, censorious.

"I am sorry, ma'am; I wished—"

"She is sick, the doctor has just left her side. She is crushed, Mr. Hartwell; her heart is broken by this great disgrace you have brought on her. You have brought it most thoughtlessly, sir, whether you are innocent or guilty of the charges which men lay to your door."

"Mrs. McCoy, ma'am—"

"A gentleman, sir, even a guilty one, would have thought twice before compromising a girl as young and unsophisticated as my daughter, by appearing in public at her side."

Hartwell was so deeply moved by her arraignment, soft-spoken, but cutting, and doubly cutting from the very refinement of her pose and speech, that he rose to his feet. He stood, tall and judicial before her, his somber coat well suited to the severe lines of his harsh, honest face.

"Ma'am, I don't feel any mortification for the part I took in Miss McCoy's innocent trip to the hay-meadow after flowers, ma'am. I don't feel anything but resentment for the narrow view these pore, ornery people have taken, ma'am, for she could walk by my side for a thousand years and never have cause to blush or turn her face away."

"A little thought beforehand would have been much better than a great deal of declamation afterwards, Mr. Hartwell. You are a disgraced man in this community, sir; you are charged with the betrayal of a sacred trust, and you have not refuted it."

"I'll do it, ma'am, to the satisfaction of everybody. I came here to-night to tell you-all about something that I've found out, ma'am."

"Your private affairs are of no interest to my daughter or to me, sir."

"Since I have been the cause of so much distress—"

"The kindest thing you can do, sir, will be to leave Cottonwood at once, and carry your unfortunate taint with you."

"I can't leave under a taint, Mrs. McCoy. I have matters to adjust here when a certain man returns."

Texas spoke so earnestly, his face was so stern,

that she looked up at him with a quick and frightened start.

"Killing men, Mr. Hartwell, never will clear you of the charge that stands against you, nor wipe away the disgrace that has come to this house through you. For Heaven's sake, go—leave Cottonwood—without making any more trouble!"

Texas was hurt to the marrow by her unwillingness to believe him, by her harping on the one string of his taint, and the sorrow that had come from it to her door. He felt that there was no use in going into the matter of Henry Stott's connection with his unfortunate entanglement, no profit in remaining there another minute in fruitless attempt to place himself in a more favorable light. Perhaps if Sallie had been there it would have been different. But Sallie was tossing that moment on her bed, burning in the fever of the first shame that ever had come into her life.

"You are a man of violence, Mr. Hartwell, you came into my daughter's notice by a violent deed. What can an outcast man, such as your doings in this country have made you, hope to gain by further violence? Surely not vindication!"

"It's guilty folks that talk of vindication, mainly, ma'am. I want justice."

"And my poor daughter—who will give her justice?"

"I thought of waitin' on the school-board, or at least a part of them, ma'am."

The proposal alarmed Mrs. McCoy. She exclaimed sharply against it, starting to her feet, confronting him with panic in her eyes.

"It would only make it worse! No, no! The kindest deed you can do will be to leave Cottonwood at once."

"If I could bring peace back to Miss McCoy by going, ma'am—"

"We might be able to fix matters up—I might get her place back for her, if you were out of the way."

Texas stood a little while, his head bowed, the weight of his contemplation heavy upon him.

"But I can't leave for a few days," he said, his voice scarcely above his breath, as if he communed with himself. Then frankly to her: "I'll not promise you to leave, Mrs. McCoy, proud as I'd be to oblige you. I've set out to clear myself before these cattlemen, and I'm a going to do it. When it's done, and you folks get your eyes open and see me right, I'll bid you fare-you-well."

"It was an unfortunate wind that blew you here."

"Ma'am, it was so. If it wasn't for Uncle Boley—"

"That poor, simple old man! Do you want to

ruin him, too—don't you know he must suffer ruin if you keep on hanging around him?"

"I've discussed that with him, ma'am. His heart's too big for the little house he lives in, ma'am; he's a gentleman from the ground up."

"Don't bring disaster to him in his old age, then. His business will suffer the minute the cattlemen hear he's standing up for you, the poor old simpleton!"

"Good night, ma'am," said Texas shortly, starting for the door.

He was affronted by her interpretation of Uncle Boley's loyalty to him. Simpleton, indeed! If she could have seen that old man's face when he came back from Stott's bank—but it was useless to burn himself out with such thoughts. He stopped in the hall and faced her solemnly.

"Mrs. McCoy, you'd have been further disgraced through me if it hadn't been for Uncle Boley," he said.

"Sir?"

"It was at Uncle Boley's hint that I waited till after dark to come here and see you and try to fetch a little comfort and cheer to you and Miss McCoy, ma'am. If it hadn't been for him I'd 'a' rushed off up here in broad daylight. And I never was a man that shunned the light of day before in my life.

I'll seek you no more, and trouble you no more. If there's any seekin' to be done, ma'am, it will come from the other side."

"If either my daughter or I need you, Mr. Hartwell, we'll call you," said she, with polite contempt. She opened the door. "Good-night, sir, and good-by."

Texas left that house with a feeling that he never had carried away from a house before in his life—a feeling of chastisement, of blame. Truly, he was an outcast in Cottonwood and the Arkansas Valley range, hopeless of ever setting things right. Perhaps it would be best for everybody but himself if he would leave Cottonwood at once, as Mrs. McCoy had suggested.

With him out of the way the sky would clear immediately for Sallie. Her discharge had been a stroke by Stott to get him out of the country, and doubtless the hint had been conveyed to her mother that all would be forgotten if he would leave Cottonwood, never to return. Stott was uncomfortable with him there. It had been Stott's intention to leave him bound in the thicket by Clear Creek until he perished, and he never had expected to see him back in Cottonwood with his dangerous secret.

And there was Uncle Boley, defiant, bold, courting the displeasure of his patrons every hour. Mrs. McCoy had spoken truly; his hanging on under the

protection of the old man would mean the ruin of his business. All considered, perhaps it would be the bravest, the wisest, and the best thing to do to pick up and leave that night.

But the story of his treason would follow him as far as men rode after cattle, along with the disgrace of having fled under Dee Winch's threat. He might leave present trouble, and clear the atmosphere for those behind him, but he would walk out into deeper disgrace himself. He would be like a man with an untried indictment against him on some hideous charge, the knowledge of which would cause men to shun him like a leper.

He was all but isolated by his trouble, and his final conclusion was, as he pondered the situation, that running away would not brighten his surroundings. It bore on him with oppression, like an old sorrow, or a family wrong which honor demanded him to avenge, but some insuperable obstacle made impossible to effect. Added to this was the melancholy that had steeped him like a fog since the message came from Winch. There was a brand on him, and a taint which the wind carried abroad. He was a listening man.

It was in such bitterness of mind that he came past Ollie Noggle's shop, and crossed the barber's way as he turned from locking his front door. It was a late and quiet hour for the business block of

Cottonwood, and the street was empty at that moment, but Noggle looked round him with what appeared to be an apprehensive sweep before speaking to Hartwell, who had paused waiting the barber's approach.

Hartwell thought he was exploring around for sight of his dreaded enemy, Zeb Smith. Noggle, he noticed, was armed with a revolver that looked rather small in comparison with his length of limb. He kept putting back the skirt of his seersucker coat to show the weapon, which had a mother-of-pearl handle, and was slung in a holster of patent leather.

"Hi're y'u?" said Noggle, still turning his look up and down the street, an air of abstraction and uneasiness about him altogether strange.

"Middlin'," Texas replied. "Was you headin' for home?"

"Ye-es," allowed the barber, standing with his revolver showing under the street light, looking this way and that, his mind plainly not on his answer.

"I'm headin' down that di-rection," said Texas.

Noggle did not make any move to fall in for the march to Malvina's embrace. He stood teetering on his long legs like some kind of insect stuck in glue, watching around him with an air of suspicion and fear that spoke little for his confidence in his gun.

"Well, I tell you, Hartwell," said he, "I was just a thinkin', you know, that maybe you'd better go on ahead, or let me go on ahead, you know. You know, you ain't in very good standin' here in Cottonwood, Hartwell, and it's apt to hurt my business to be seen out with you, you know."

He hummed and hawed a good deal in getting it out, and shifted from leg to leg like an embarrassed schoolgirl. Texas felt the blood come hot into his face, and his scorn for this chicken-headed shaver of gritty chins knocking at his teeth for utterance. He held himself in with an effort, and managed to speak without a tremor, although he flavored his words with a dash of contempt which was lost on Noggle as completely as a drop of his perfume would have been overwhelmed in a barrel of tar.

"I wouldn't take a shave away from you for a million dollars, or more," Texas said. "I'll go ahead, for I'm in a hurry to go to bed. It'll count more for you to have folks think you're chasin' me than that I'm a chasin' you."

"All right, Hartwell. A man's got to look out for number one, you know, specially if he's got a wife dependin' on him."

Hartwell did not feel that he could be trusted to make comment on that plea. He hurried off toward the hotel, where he was in earnest conversa-

tion with Malvina when Noggle came grinning in at the office door.

"Was somebody sayin' you'd hurt my business if you stayed on here at the hotel, Mr. Hartwell?" Malvina demanded, rather severely, at that moment.

Noggle stopped when the words hit him, and jerked back like a foolish horse rearing against the halter. The animated triumph which suffused his narrow face over the feat of threading alone the perils of the streets faded out of him, leaving him the color of a boiled ear of corn.

"No, ma'am; nobody was sayin' that in so many words, ma'am," Texas replied; "but takin' the events of the day to base my judgment on, it might turn out thataway."

"Wait till it does," said she, with firm and lofty finality.

"I think it will be the wisest thing for me to pack out of here, and bring no trouble to your door, Mrs. Noggle," Texas maintained. "I seem to leave a trail of bad luck behind me, and you-all have been so kind to me here I'd rather cut my arm off than cause you to lose a dollar."

Malvina was behind the counter, her round white arms resting on the showcase, her round, freckled face as full of softness and good-nature as a human countenance could contain. Noggles came up and cleared his throat.

"I expect if he wants to leave, Malvina, you'd better let him," he suggested.

"What's bitin' *you?*" said Malvina, not even turning her eyes in her husband's direction.

Texas could not forbear landing one little dig, one little barb of discomfort, in Noggle's perfumed hide.

"Even your husband is afraid to be seen on the street with me any more," said he.

Malvina turned to Noggle now with fire in her eyes.

"Oh, *he* is, is he?"

"If it would hurt his business, ma'am, what might my stoppin' here in the *ho*-tel do to yours?"

Malvina took her arms down from the showcase, and came round from behind the counter. The color was gone out of her face, and her eyes were very bright.

"Mr. Hartwell, maybe there *are* some people in the world little enough to put business above gratitude," said she, never turning an eye toward her wilted, shifting husband; "but I'm not one of that kind."

She faced Noggle, burning him with a look that made him squirm.

"Maybe you're afraid to be seen on the street with Mr. Hartwell, but I ain't! I ain't afraid to be seen anywhere with him; I'd go to—"

"Well, Malvina, a man's got to think of his business, you know."

"Yes, and I'd let him have room and board in this house if the last cow-man on the range turned from the door on account of it, and I'd tell 'em all to go straight to hell!"

"Well, Malvina, you know—"

"I'd give him my last dollar if he wanted it, and if that wasn't enough I'd go out and borrow more! As far as I'm concerned they can all go straight—"

"So would I!" said Mrs. Goodloe, coming into the dining-room door, her arms red from dishwater, her apron wet from the splashings of it.

"The trouble with people in this town is they don't know a *man* when they see one," Malvina declared; "that's what the trouble with these rundowns is!"

Texas took off his hat and gave Malvina his hand.

"Ma'am, I'm proud to know you!" he said. He stepped over to Mrs. Goodloe and shook hands with her. "And you, too, ma'am—I'm proud to know you both."

Noggle stood rubbing the back of his hand across his big mustache, no doubt feeling something like an outsider in the midst of his own family. He was well enough broken-in already to offer no further comment. All he did was stretch hugely, gape

amazingly, and take off his little dove-gray hat and try to look unconcerned as became a valiant man with a thirty-two caliber pistol at his belt.

"Gosh! I'm as tired as a wet dog," he said.

"You better go to bed, then," said Malvina, at no pains to cover her displeasure with her new mate.

Noggle acted on the suggestion at once, heaving himself off up-stairs on his long, ostrich legs, his light trousers making quite an elegant showing as they flickered between the balusters. Malvina shifted the register, and dusted the place where it had lain with her apron, saying nothing until Noggle's feet had sounded along the uncarpeted hall overhead and come to silence.

"There was a man here lookin' for you a little while before you came in, Mr. Hartwell," she said.

"Did you know who he was?"

"No, he was a stranger to me—a little dark man off of the range somewhere. Well, I don't know all of 'em—new ones is comin' in all the time. He said he'd be back."

"I'll set outside by the door and wait for him, thank you, ma'am."

"Don't you mention it," returned Malvina with such stress of earnestness that it was almost a threat. "Wouldn't you like a cup of coffee and a piece of pie?"

"Thank you, ma'am, most kindly, but I'm so full

of trouble I ain't got room for anything else. I don't feel like I want to eat again for seven or eight years."

"It'll all come out right—don't you worry over it, Mr. Hartwell."

"For my own part I can carry it; but look what I've brought on Miss Sallie McCoy, ma'am."

Malvina was wiping the showcase with her apron now, her head behind it, her face hidden.

"You was up there to see them this evening, wasn't you?"

"Yes, I called in on 'em for a minute."

"I heard they had the doctor for Sallie."

"So her mother told me, ma'am."

"It's a shame the way the school-board treated that girl! But it's nothing to get sick over—she knows she wasn't hurt nor spoilt by bein' seen walkin' along the street with you. It's foolish, plumb foolish!"

"But knowin' he's to blame for trouble like that is as draggin' on a man as a broken leg, ma'am. When did that man say he'd be back?"

"In a little while, he said."

"I'll set out in the cool of the night and wait for him, and thank you most generous for all your kindness to a footless stranger like me, ma'am."

Texas went out and sat on the bench along the hotel wall. There was a little space between the

sidewalk and the building, and he sat in the shadow where he could see readily but be seen indistinctly. He was troubled over this stranger's presence in Cottonwood, for he believed it must be some messenger from Winch with a fresh taunt and defiance, or from Duncan, bearing word that would add to his unrest.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY

FEW people were passing that hour, for it was late for respectable Cottonwood, and the other half didn't roam down into that section. Texas had not waited long on the bench beside the door, scanning hurriedly every man who came into view, his mind alert, his hand ready to his gun, when the one for whom he waited came.

The stranger approached him without hesitation, Texas standing, turning to bring his elbow free from interference against the wall.

"Hello, Texas," came the familiar hail.

"Sir, good evening," Texas returned, watching the stranger narrowly, puzzled by his familiarity.

The stranger was of medium height, but slender. He was dressed in the regulation cowboy style, except that his chaparejos were of plain leather instead of the hairy kind so much in vogue at that time on the Arkansas Valley range.

He was standing where the light fell full on him through the open door, and the friendliness of his attitude was as mystifying to Texas as his identity.

"Don't you know me, Texas?"

He came a step nearer, turning his head in the light so Texas could see his face clearly. But beyond establishing that he was a comely youth, dark-skinned as an Indian, with dark hair cut close to his handsome head, Texas could make out nothing at all.

"No, sir; you've got me, as sure as you're born."

"Why, I'm your old side-pardner, Ben Chouteau, from the Nation," said the unaccountable stranger, speaking a little louder, for the benefit of Malvina, apparently, who had come to the door.

Texas started at the clearer note of that boyish treble, held out his hand, giving the cowboy the grip of genuine friendliness.

"I'm glad to see you—I'm more than glad, old feller!" he said. "It's an old friend of mine, a sure-enough *good* friend, like the rest of you-all here at this *ho*-tel, ma'am," he assured Malvina, who nodded, entirely satisfied, and returned to her duties within the house.

Texas drew the stranger into the shadow, still holding him by the hand.

"Miss Fannie!" he whispered. "Where in this world did you come from—what're you doin' rigged up thataway?"

"Even *you* didn't know me!"

"Not till you spoke loud thataway, then it come to me in a flash."

"I'm supposed to be dead, Texas."

"You don't tell me, Miss Fannie!"

"Well, I am. So we've got to go easy, and don't forget I'm your old side-pardner from the Nation, and Ben Chouteau's my name."

"I'll remember; don't you doubt I'll remember."

"I've come back to this town to throw a crimp into some of the crooks that thought they'd salted my old hide down, and I want you to help me, Texas."

"My heart's with you, and my hand's the same as your own."

"We'll have a bunch of these crooks breakin' their necks to hit the timber before this time tomorrow night. But I don't want to talk around here where somebody might be listenin'. Do you care to take a little walk?"

They walked toward the railroad station, for in that direction the town quickly blended out to open prairie, where there was room for all the confidences in the world to pass from ear to ear without danger of a leak. They came into range of a noise of shouting men and the rumble of hoofs on planks as they left the town, telling that cattle were being loaded.

"It's that Texas crowd," said Fannie; "they're roundin' them up fast. They shipped a big bunch two days ago, they told me—I came up that way

to-day, passed right through the thick of them. I guess there'll not be any trouble over them."

"Lucky for Stott!" said he.

"How did you know Stott was in it, Texas?"

"I knew him by his cussed voice."

"Anybody would that ever heard him twice."

They sat down by the roadside, far from any house. There was no moon, but starlight strong enough to break the density of the night, and a soft wind filled with the spicy ripe scents of drying grasses and blooming flowers in the boundless meadow lands.

"Stott's the first man on my list," she said.

"And mine, too, Fannie."

"He thought he left both of us dead down there on Clear Creek that night, Texas."

"Did that monstrous scoun'rel lift his hand—"

"Here—feel here." She guided his hand to the back of her head, where he felt a strip of adhesive plaster over a long wound.

"The houn' hit you!"

"I tried to go back and turn you loose."

"You pore little lamb! He hit you with his gun, didn't he, Fannie?"

"My horse ran away when I lopped over in the saddle, just sense enough left in me to hang on somehow. I think he shot after me—I think I can remember shots. Anyhow, I fell off after a while,

and the horse went on. I heard Stott go by chasin' it, and go back with it. Then I crawled into the brush and fainted, I guess, like a regular woman."

"How in this merciless world did you ever get out of there?"

"I don't hardly know, Texas. I knew Stott would be back there at daylight to look for me, and finish me off if he found me alive, and I remember startin' to run away. When I got my head again I was away down in the Nation, miles from that place, and it was afternoon. I guess it must have been the next day."

"And you knew where you was—I'll bet a purty you knew!"

"Lucky for my skin, I did, Texas. I wasn't more than fifteen miles from Colby's ranch. I got over there about dark. My head was as big as a barrel, and my hair so mussed and matted with blood and tangles I had Belle whack it off right close up to the handle. She stitched up the gap in my scalp, and in the morning I was about as usual. Oh, well, I was a little fuzzy around the edges, like you feel after a drunk. Belle stained me up with walnut hulls, and I borrowed a horse and rode up here, hoping that I'd find you. And that's all there is to *that,* Texas."

Texas marveled over her escape, and sympathized with her in little soft ejaculations. She in-

quired of his own adventures after they parted, and he told her all that had overtaken him from that time forward. Fannie sat silent a long time when he had fiinshed, as if there was something in his story that threw her into deep thought. After a while:

"Texas?"

"Yes, Fannie."

"That girl they fired, the one I helped Mackey and Stott and that gang hand out the crooked deal to—you think a good deal of her, don't you, Texas?"

"I hold her in the highest of respect—I have a very warm, friendly feelin' for her, Fannie."

"Of course you have, Texas, and more than that," she said, as if she had thought it out to an indisputable conclusion. "That's all right—you've got a right to—she's a nice kid, you can see it in her eyes."

"She's not exactly a kid, Fannie; she's a woman as old as you."

"Yes, but she's a kid in experience. Well, I wish to God I was, too! If I was, maybe—"

She let it stop there, and sat with her chin in her hands, her hat on the ground. He could see the white strip of adhesive plaster on her head, and his compassion for her was as deep as the sea.

"How do you know I'm square with you, Texas

—how do you know I'm not planning to draw you into some fresh trouble?"

"I can't tell you just how I know, Fannie, but I know."

"Well, I am square with you. It came to me down there on Clear Creek that night that I *had* to be square; that it was the time set for me to part company with crooks. I'm through with them; they never brought me anything but trouble, anyhow."

"No, I don't reckon it pays out, Fannie."

"There's no use to tell *you* what my life's been, Texas—you *know!*"

"You pore little dove!"

He spoke with great tenderness, with boundless compassion; took her hand and stroked it, as if to console her for all that had been denied her in the parched ways that she had walked. Fannie bent her head to her updrawn knees and sobbed as if some great growth of sorrow had suddenly broken in her heart.

Her gust of weeping passed away slowly, only coming back now and then in diminishing force, like a bitter wind, making her voice shiver when she spoke.

"You're the only man that ever treated me like I was as good as other women," she said; "the only man I ever knew since I was a little girl, it seems

to me, that says the same things with eyes and words to me at the same time. I'd die for you, Texas—I'd die for you, and be glad!"

Texas was greatly disturbed by her sudden and stormy confession. No woman, good or bad, ever had gone to such an honest and outspoken length with him before, and he had no precedent to guide him in the circumstances. But he still held her hand and stroked it to comfort her, and make amends for what he could not give her out of his heart.

"I couldn't ever permit you to do that, Miss Fannie," he said in all seriousness; "I couldn't begin to hear of it!"

Along the railroad half a mile away he could see the bobbing lanterns of the men who were loading part of the big drove of Texas cattle. He knew that Stott had gone on ahead to Kansas City to arrange for the sale of them, and collect for those already shipped, and a feeling of impatience came up in his breast at the thought of how many days it would be before he returned to face the adjustment that he could not now escape. He got up with an air of briskness, and drew gently on her hand to lift her to her feet.

"Don't you think we'd better go now, Fannie? You'll be drug plumb to death, you'll be so tired."

"Sit down, Texas; I haven't begun to tell you

what I've got on that gang. We've both suffered by what they've handed us, but it's our day to talk now. Sit down—I'll tell you something."

When they started back to the hotel, Texas could read in the Big Dipper that it was close to two o'clock. But his weariness had gone from him, his troubles had dissolved. He felt like a man who had been armed to meet an enemy before whom he had stood bare-handed and hopeless a little while before.

Only a few hours since he had walked through the streets of Cottonwood in the distrust and contempt of the earth's mean cowards, such as Ollie Noggle, and the accusation of others, a load so heavy that it almost broke his heart. The back door of that town had stood open to him, and fingers were pointing him out that way between the dusk and dawn.

But it was different now. Confidence was in his heart, power in his hand. There would be a smoke in that town before long, and the crooks would be running ahead of it, like chinch bugs out of a blazing stubble field.

Even Mrs. Goodloe had gone to bed when they reached the hotel, and there was nobody to place Fannie. But Texas knew that half the rooms were empty, and one had but to go roaming along the hall until he found an open door. That was the

rule for late arrivals at the Woodbine, known far and wide over the range.

The room next to his own was empty, investigation disclosed, although a heavy-snoring cow-man had inhabited it the night before. Here Texas installed his side-partner, to go and sit by his own window until dawn, aflame with eagerness to make use of the astonishing information which Fannie Goodnight had put that night into his hands.

CHAPTER XIX

MISUNDERSTANDING

"IT wasn't nothing but one of them back-breakin' headaches like a woman will git ever so often," Uncle Boley said. "I went up there this morning to see how she was, and she met me at the door herself, her eyes as big as tea-cups, but smilin', son, smilin'."

"She'd smile, sir, I'd bet you a purty, if the last drop of blood was bein' drawn from her veins, like that old-time Roman lady, sir, and she'd 'low it didn't hurt a bit."

"I never heard tell of the lady you speak of, son, but Sallie McCoy can stand pain and sufferin' as good as any Indian that ever lived. She's been through it; she bends before the wind like a willer, but when the sun comes out you see her standin' straight, maybe with some signs of tears like the rain on the willer-leaves, but standin' straight up with her eyes on the sky."

"This was different to any trouble she'd ever met before, and it must have cut her deeper, Uncle Boley, deeper than death and bereavement."

"Yes, she always had the highest respect of every-

body—oh, well, she has yet, too. Them scoundrels a firin' her out of her job in the school won't make anybody that knows her think the less of her."

"She realizes that, sir, I'm sure. But there must be a good many newcomers in this town that don't know her. That's where it'll hurt. But there's a day of reckonin' close, sir, mighty close! And when it comes, I tell you, Uncle Boley, that school-board'll go down on their knees to her, and they'll take off their hats to me, and stand to one side when I go by, and I'll bet you a purty they'll do it, sir!"

Uncle Boley was putting holes through the sole of a mighty boot, preparing it for the thread. He left his awl standing in the leather, his hammer free of his hand on the bench, and looked at Texas with sharp, questioning eyes.

"I thought you looked danged pert and rambunctious for a feller that ain't got no name or fame or character whatsomever, as the lawyer said. What's been happenin'?"

"Something happened, Uncle Boley, that put me in tune like a fiddle, and raised my heart up like a bird in the morning. A friend of mine struck town last night lookin' for me, a little Indian feller from down in the Nation, Bennie Chouteau by name, and he came bearin' proof that puts the responsibility for them southern cattle on Henry

Stott so certain he can't back out of it to save his ornery skin."

"Amen!"

Uncle Boley gave the bench a whack with his hammer that made the bottle of blacking on the shelf jump, and the finished boots standing there in a row shift as if they were setting their heels for a jig.

"Yes, sir; and that ain't all, it ain't half—it ain't more than the first word of what that little feller knows!"

"A man can't hide it—it'll come up agin him, it'll come up agin him out of the ground!"

Uncle Boley's hand trembled as he jerked the awl from the boot-sole and held it like a dagger.

"Miss Sallie's a comin', sir, as I live!"

Texas rose in embarrassment, pushed back his chair, and retreated as far as the partition, where he stood with his back against Uncle Boley's bedroom door. Few marks of his battle with the cowman Sawyer remained on his face that morning, where a new animation lighted the severity of its lines. Neither was there anything to be ashamed of, to draw back and attempt to hide, in his dress, which was neat and clean, with a flash of scarlet necktie at the collar of his gray woolen shirt, and tucked into his bosom as if it sprung from the fire of his heart.

Yet he looked as if he would have run away if he had been given time, as thirsty as his heart was for the cool laving of those soft, brown eyes, as hungry as his soul for the music of her voice. But there was not time for retreat; Sallie was in the door.

She was dressed in white linen, and her face was as pale as some religious penitent's who had knelt night-long beside a shrine. The virginal sorrow of her eyes struck the heart like a sad soft chord from a great, vibrant organ. She paused in the door a moment, a packet of papers and letters in her hand.

Uncle Boley rose to greet her in the ceremonious way that he always carried toward her, and she went forward without hesitation, or reservation, or question in her heart, and gave Hartwell her hand. Certain now that he was to be neither blasted nor scorned, he placed the chair for her, and the little shop instantly became for him the most glorious place in the world.

"You wasn't expectin' to find this feller here, was you?" Uncle Boley asked in the bantering lightness so common in the manner of the old toward the young.

"I hoped I'd find Mr. Hartwell here, Uncle Boley," she admitted with frankness, lifting her eyes to Hartwell's face, a flush in her pale cheeks.

The fire at once sprang to Hartwell's own brown, homely face, as if it leaped the space between them from heart to heart and found congenial fuel there.

"Well, you had a right to," said Uncle Boley, rather taken aback by her ready confession.

Texas stood up proudly, his head held high, glad that she was not ashamed to have it known that she had sought his company, despised as he was of men.

"I was afraid, from what mother said last night, that you might be gone, or about to leave, Mr. Hartwell. I want to ask you not to leave Cottonwood on my account, if there is any reason whatever for your staying on."

"Thank you, Miss Sallie. I felt so lonesome and cussed, and full of blame last night after I'd talked with your mother that I just wanted to sneak off into a corner somewhere and die like a dog. But things have changed around wonderfully since then, Miss Sallie. I've just got to stay around here for a day or two more."

"I'm glad it's coming out right for you." She gave him such a look that his heart melted in him, as it felt, with a most delicious pain. "Have the cattlemen found out their mistake, Mr. Hartwell?"

"Not just yet," said he portentously. "A friend of mine—here he comes now."

Fannie and Hartwell had arranged between

them for a little test on Uncle Boley, for the purpose of learning under the shrewd eyes of that sharp-seeing old fellow how well her disguise covered her indentity. If it was sufficient to pass with him, they believed it would hold good anywhere in Cottonwood. In the end they intended to take him into their confidence, for Hartwell knew that he could be trusted to the rim of the world.

Fannie appeared in the door with a quick, half-careless, "Hello, Texas," hat pulled over her eyes, very much an Indian in appearance, indeed. She was wearing gloves with red stars worked into the gauntlets, and spurs with rowels which clicked on the floor as she walked. She was a trim figure of a cowboy, but not unusual in a field where light-framed men were the general rule.

Confident and careless as she appeared there when Texas introduced her as his friend Ben Chouteau, from the Nation, Fannie had walked in shrinking fear between the hotel and Uncle Boley's shop. She dreaded meeting some of the old gang who had been the tyrants of her past life of oppression, unconscious herself how truly effective was her disguise.

"I wanted you to meet my friend, Uncle Boley," Texas explained, "for we may need your help on certain matters of business that we've got to clear up in this town in the next day or two."

"You can count on me to the last button of my jeans, boys. I used to know some Chouteaus up by Westport—might you be related to that crowd,"

"Distantly related," Fannie replied, speaking in a low voice. She felt uncomfortable under the eyes of Sallie McCoy, although without reason apparently, for Sallie had opened the Kansas City paper and seemed oblivious to all outside its pages.

"Them folks was French-Indians, and good business men, too. I don't recall now what tribe they belonged to, but they all went off to the Nation a long time ago."

"My people are Shawnees," said Fannie, sure of herself there, for it was entirely true.

Sallie McCoy turned her eyes upward to look over the top of the paper as Fannie spoke, and sat studying the masquerader a moment. Fannie stood with her back to Sallie, facing Uncle Boley across the little counter, Texas over by the door.

From where he stood Hartwell watched Sallie's behavior with alarm, for her close reading of the paper was only a sham and a pretense to cover her close scrutiny of the stranger from the Nation. When Fannie was not speaking, Sallie's eyes were decorously on the paper; when she spoke, they lifted, although the position of her face did not change. But there was nothing of suspicion, wonder, even curiosity in the look which she swept over

Fannie Goodnight's back. It was more like the indefinable, knowledge-gathering stare of a little girl.

"'I've made boots for lots of them big Indians down there," said Uncle Boley; "them ranchers along just below the line. They used to come up here regular, but in the last year or so they've been givin' me the go-by."

He named over several, all of whom Fannie knew, and added some detail to what the old man had said to prove the genuineness of her acquaintance. This pleased Uncle Boley mightily; it was the same as meeting an old friend. And Fannie was glad that such a safe vein had been opened for her to follow. It relieved her of the necessity of facing about and talking to Sallie McCoy, whose cool brown eyes she seemed to feel looking through her, right down to the end of her last pitiful secret, and despising them all.

Texas was growing so uneasy that he was beginning to sweat. He wanted to pass a hint to Fannie to go, and stood shifting his weight from leg to leg, debating whether it wouldn't be the most honest thing to take Sallie into the secret then and there, thus relieving the suspicion that he saw growing up in her mind. But doubt over Sallie's readiness to accept on such short notice, and under such peculiar conditions, the girl who had been a

party to defrauding her out of her victory in the roping contest, held him back.

Fannie managed to break out of Uncle Boley's windy grasp at last. She turned to Texas with a hasty word that she must go. She shook hands with Uncle Boley, and from the door nodded good-by to Sallie, who inclined her head, her eyes lifting for a flash from the paper, and dropping instantly again to her reading.

"Nice kid," said Uncle Boley, "and a youngster, from his talk."

"Yes, sir, quite young, sir," said Texas, drawing a long breath for the first time in ten minutes as Fannie passed the window and was gone from sight.

Sallie folded her paper, gathered her mail, got up, and stood looking Texas Hartwell in the eyes as straight as if she aimed a rifle to shoot him dead. Her face was colorless, her eyes full of indignant fire.

"Mr. Hartwell, I don't believe there is any reason whatever, sir, for you to remain in Cottonwood another hour! The best thing—the *manliest* thing—you can do will be to take the first train that passes, no matter which way it goes!"

She passed him, holding her skirt back for fear the hem of it might brush him, and almost darted out of the door, and away. Uncle Boley leaned

over the counter and looked after her, his beard working, his mouth open, but no sound coming out of him in that moment of greatest astonishment of his long and crowded years.

Texas was little less winded, although astonishment over her action was not among his emotions. Too well he knew the cause of her sudden scorn. The high feeling of pride that lately had warmed him and lifted him to the clouds was gone; his hope had collapsed in one swift word. The sun seemed to have gone under a cloud, the noise out of life and the world.

"Well, what *in* the hell!" said Uncle Boley.

"Sir, I've gone and mussed it all up again!" said Texas miserably. "That wasn't any man that was in here a minute ago, Uncle Boley; it was a girl dressed up like one, and she knew it!"

"A girl? What do you mean trickin' Sallie? What girl, damn it all, *what* girl?"

"Fannie Goodnight, sir. We wanted—"

Uncle Boley stood rolling his head from side to side as if he had been struck with a mortal pain. He groaned, eyes closed, hands clasping his head like an old Jew mourning beside the temple wall.

"She knew it, sir—she knew it from the first look! I'd give my heart out of my body if I could undo what's done, Uncle Boley!"

"Any fool can say that after he's kicked over the

mush! Well, you've done it now, you've fixed yourself with her for good. I don't blame her, you keepin' that girl down there at the hotel under false pretenses—"

"I'm not keeping her, sir! She's payin' her way; I ain't got—"

"In your room, under pretext she's a man!"

"No such a thing, sir, Uncle Boley, sir!"

Texas was so vehement in his denial that he was almost wild. He swung his long arms, and slammed his hat down on the counter as if stripping himself to fight.

"Well, maybe not in the same room, but it looks just as bad to Sallie."

"She'll think I brought her up here to parade before her face!"

"Yes, and worse than that. No man can imagine the things a woman can think when she believes somebody else has crowded her out of his heart."

"There's not room even for a ghost to come in there beside Miss Sallie edgeways, Uncle Boley."

"You'll have a gay old time makin' her believe you."

"I'll never have even the show of doin' it!"

"What'd that darned Fannie want to go puttin' on britches for and paradin' herself around?"

"Uncle Boley, she wouldn't dare to show her face in this town in her own clothes. Stott thinks he

killed her down there on Clear Creek the night of the raid—she's got a gash three inches long on the back of her head where he hit her with his gun."

"Say, is that so?"

Uncle Boley began to see through it like a reasonable man. Texas told him the facts in the matter, and how Fannie had come there in that disguise to find him. Before he was very far into the story the old man's face was glowing with admiration, and when he concluded Uncle Boley put out his hand in token that his belief and his friendship remained unshaken.

"I hope to see you two turn that feller Stott over like a snappin' turtle left on his back in the road."

"It will be done, Uncle Boley. And when it's done I'll set my foot on the road to go—I'll not have anything to stay around here for any more."

"If you're thinkin' about Sallie, I reckon not."

"I meant well—you can tell her when I'm gone that I meant well; but I kind of always tangled my feet up in the rope."

"You didn't have no call to fetch that girl up here to test her on me. I'd 'a' took your word for it, Texas."

"I know it, sir."

"But it looks like things is shaped and set, and a man can't go around 'em, no matter which way he dodges. I guess it was laid out for this thing

to come between you and Sallie. Well, a girl that'll do what Fannie tried to do for you ain't the worst kind a man could hitch up to; I don't care what mistakes she's made before."

"Her wings are singed, Uncle Boley, but her heart's as good as they make 'em."

Uncle Boley went to his bench and took up his work. He drove holes and he stitched, with his wax-end on his beard, and said nothing for a long time. Texas stood in the door, his temples throbbing, his world absolutely empty. Even the great work ahead of him seemed to have no purpose and no flavor now. But it must be finished, giving him a clean passport when he should turn his face away from that place to come back no more.

"It'll strike deep in Sallie," Uncle Boley said in time. "I don't think she'll ever overlook this. Well, I'm sorry. I had hopes I'd see you two settled down here, where maybe I could go to lay my head among them that cared for me when my time came at last."

"I'm sorry, Uncle Boley, from the bottom of my heart."

But the words had a perfunctory sound in his own ear as he spoke, and he knew there could be no consolation in them for Uncle Boley. Texas lingered on a little while in the shop, and then left

to wander off over the prairie, where he could be alone with his troubles under the sky.

Late in the afternoon he visited the bank to inquire after Stott's return. To his satisfaction he learned that the banker would come home on the early morning train.

CHAPTER XX

A DAY OF RECKONING

STOTT was at his desk early, for banking-hours ran long in Cottonwood. After the habit of bankers, who seem to be so eager that the world see what they are doing, when in reality so little of it is ever known, Stott's desk was near the one window in the front of the brick building on the corner.

This was a low structure, built especially for the bank, and it was an ugly and uninviting place for any man to enter and leave his money. The word "Bank" was cut into the limestone lintel of the door, and painted again in gilt across the window near which Stott displayed his financial prowess.

As seen from the street that morning, Henry Stott was a figure to inspire a sense of solidity, even if one could read no deeper at a passing glance through his gilt-adorned window-pane. He was a large man, at work without a coat, heavy suspenders over his white shirt, no necktie to his collar; a man of pasty-whiteness, of broad, soft face, and small eyes placed so far apart that they looked as if

nature had designed them for watching both sides of the fence at once.

Banking in that part of the country in those days was a game of chance for both the bank and its patrons. A gambling-house was a safer and surer business for the man that owned it, and the chances were about even between the two institutions when it came to profit and surety for the patrons. It was a significant fact that more banks than gambling-houses failed in the cattle country in those times.

But, unpromising as the bank appeared, and uncouth as the banker, large transactions were the daily rule within those uninviting walls. Loans of a hundred thousand dollars had been no unusual thing in the experience of Henry Stott, short loans at that, with interest as high as ten per centum monthly.

Cattlemen in a hole were glad to accept his hard conditions until they could turn their stock, and consider it a favor. When they sold, their money, such as remained to them, went on deposit in Stott's bank, to be loaned out to others on the same unstable security. The risks were big for the banker, and his profits probably justified thereby.

So there was no lack of money in the squat little bank, no matter what day or hour you might come to it, and no unusual sight, indeed, to see a cattleman get off the train from Kansas City, walk into

the bank, open his old, battered gripsack, and pile up seventy-five or eighty thousand dollars for deposit as carelessly as some of us would handle collars. Those were the days on the range when men made money in a hurry when they made it, and lost it on the jump when it began to go. There wasn't any plodding, slow-going medium road for a faint-hearted man.

There were but two people regularly engaged in the bank besides Stott, the bookkeeper and receiving-paying teller. Neither of these had arrived when Texas Hartwell and Fannie Goodnight walked in through the wide-swung door and confronted Stott at his desk. A revolver lay on the desk within Stott's instant grasp, a rifle leaned against the wall not three feet away, and he seemed to hesitate between them as his early visitors drew up to the railing behind which he sat.

Stott was facing the door, and, as his hand crept now stealthily toward his revolver weighting the pile of papers at his side, his eyes sought the street as if for the waiting horses, or accomplices, of the two who had appeared so unexpectedly.

"It isn't a raid, Mr. Stott, sir," Texas hastened to assure him. "We've come to talk over a matter of business with you."

"Well, what can I do for you?" Stott asked, his

ludicrous, high, metallic voice in absurd keeping with his bulk.

He looked them over sharply, sure of Texas at the first glance, as his expression betrayed, but altogether at sea regarding Fannie, who had added colored spectacles to her disguise.

"I see you know me," Texas said.

"I was just wonderin' if I did," Stott replied, affably enough, and apparently at ease, "but you've got me."

"It was night-time when we met, and you couldn't see my face, but from what you said at that time, sir, I was sure you knew who you were ropin' up."

A little color came into Stott's face as Texas spoke, but he laughed with a show of good humor, like a man who appreciates the spirit of a joke, even though he doesn't understand it.

"I guess I don't belong to your lodge," he said.

As he spoke his fingers were tapping the stock of his revolver paper-weight, and his quick little eyes were following every movement of foot and hand of the pair before him.

"We came in on you early, Mr. Stott, to save makin' these explanations before folks, and we haven't got time to trifle away on useless introduc-

tions. You know me, and you know who's with me."

"We've come to talk over old times with you, Henry—away back old times."

In spite of his stolidity Stott's face changed at Fannie's first word. He jumped to his feet, revolver in hand.

"Get to hell out of here!" he ordered.

"You'd better put down that gun, Henry," Fannie cautioned with reproachful scorn.

"You can't come in here and work any of your blackmail on me!"

"Sir, we're not even goin' to try it."

Texas had drawn back a step from the railing. He stood with his hand on his gun, every muscle of his body set.

"Get to hell out of here!" Stott repeated, his revolver lifted as if to fire a signal. Texas made a little motion of caution, an eloquent command of restraint, with his left hand, the other on his pistol-stock.

"Put down that gun, sir!" he ordered. "We're not intendin' to rob you—we're after a settlement of another kind."

Stott was purple in the congestion of rage and fright. His moment had gone, and he seemed to realize it, for the weapon in his hand wavered. He made an indecisive movement as if to put it down,

another as if to point it toward the ceiling and fire. But his moment had passed.

If he had fired it on the impulse he could have carried it for an attempt to rob the bank, and no testimony to the contrary ever would have convinced the public of Cottonwood. Besides that, there wouldn't have been anybody left to testify. Now it was too late to summon help, and Stott knew it. Texas had not drawn his gun; Fannie had not even put her hand to the weapon she wore. A banker couldn't rise up and give the alarm of thieves every time armed men came in his door, for eight out of ten of his customers wore guns.

"We want to talk Southern cattle for a minute, for one thing, unless you'd rather we'd talk it over with Duncan and the association," Texas said, a politeness in his voice that he did not feel in his heart.

Stott threw the gun down with a jerk of the head, in the manner of a man who yields to pressure against his judgment.

"Well, what do you want?"

"A little dab of justice," Texas said. "Your clerk's just stepped in next door for his morning snort, and he'll be here direc'ly. When he comes, you tell him we're goin' to your private room back yonder to talk over a deal. There'll not be any shootin', and there'll not be any cussin' and snortin',

Mr. Stott, sir, unless you start it up yourself."

The teller came in before Texas had finished speaking; a little wrinkled old man, wearing his hat with juvenile tilt over his left ear, walking in a veritable alcoholic fog. Stott addressed him as "major," with a word about the business ahead, and led the way to his private room, with "President" painted on its door. Texas closed the door after them.

Stott threw back the top of his desk with a clatter, and sat down, facing them, with his thick hands spread on his thighs, a surly defiance in his face.

"Accordin' to your intentions both of us ought to be dead down in the brush on Clear Creek," Texas said.

Stott leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head, as if he had suddenly thrown away his worry and his ill-humor along with it, and had settled down into his unruffled business front.

"How far do you suppose your word would go against mine with the cattlemen on this range?" he wanted to know.

"I don't count," Texas admitted. "That's why I'm here to send you out to talk for me."

"You're a slick pair!" Stott sneered. "Now you're here, say something."

"One way or another, I aim to say enough to satisfy you, Mr. Stott."

Fannie had dropped wearily into a chair and taken off her hat. She sat looking up at Texas, who stood before Stott in the dignity of his clean life and clean conscience, a superman compared with the gross, heavy-feeding banker. If there was admiration in her eyes, surely it was justified; and confidence, certainly it was not altogether misplaced.

Stott looked at her, a sneering smile lifting his thick lip.

"Fannie, what're you goin' to tell them?" he asked in a manner of friendly banter.

"I'll tell enough to crack your neck, you swill-guzzler!"

Stott's anger burned up his caution in a flash. He unclasped his thick hands, leveling a finger at her face, a vile name on his tongue.

"You and Mackey went into this to hold me up!" he charged.

Fannie leaned toward him, her face dark with the flush that sprang into it, holding out one hand to stop Texas, who had started at the name which Stott had applied to her as if he would turn it back down the foul lane of his throat.

"I went into it to draw a card to fill the hand I waited a long time to play against you, Henry Stott. It wasn't because Johnnie Mackey—"

"And you threw both of us down for this Texas

rattler! If Mackey's half the man I think he is he'll cut your throat for that little trick!"

"He's not even that much of a man!"

"I'm sorry I didn't—"

"Let me talk a minute, Henry," said Fannie, something of her old sauciness in her manner, broken in spirit as she seemed to be. "Ever since I began to help Mackey shove his counterfeit money and raised bills, I've been holding a hand against you, waiting for the day when I was ready to make a big clean-up and quit."

"You never had anything on me, you little—"

"Johnnie's not much of a man, but he will stand by his friends—up to a certain time," she continued, unmoved by Stott's interruption. "We fussed over it the night before I went down there to help you trap Texas. Johnnie tried to kill me that time. I was afraid of the little devil after that."

Stott rolled his head, laughed a little, played with a pencil on his desk. He seemed rather amused by this attempt to trouble the waters of his security.

"I never trusted Mackey, even when we were as thick as we could be mixed, for he's a man that will throw anybody to save himself, and I started out early to get a cinch on him that I could twist when the time came. I got it, Henry."

"Well, go an' hold him up," Stott suggested mockingly.

"Mackey was afraid to use what he had on you, and I was satisfied to hold off on it as long as I didn't need the money. When you started him up in business here, Johnnie considered things square between him and you."

"I never started him up in business here, or anywhere else," Stott declared, red with his vehemence.

"Johnnie was satisfied, he was making ten dollars to your one. I got to thinking the hand I held against you never would be any good, and I was glad enough to draw another to fill. I'm full now; I hold a royal flush."

"And the settlement you're going to make to-day, sir," said Texas very gently, his voice low and well controlled, "goes back to the time Mackey raised that six-thousand-dollar note of Ed McCoy's for you to read sixty thousand, the very day you murdered McCoy with your own hand."

"You're a liar!" said Stott, springing to his feet, his face as white as the dead. "I'll make you prove it!"

"You'd better set down and keep cool," Texas advised.

"Do you realize what it means to charge a man with murder?" Stott demanded. His hand shook as he gripped the back of his chair.

"To the last word I do, Mr. Stott."

"I'll hand you over to the sheriff—I'll make you

sweat for this dirty attempt to blackmail me!"

"If you're still in that notion five minutes from now, go and do it, sir."

Fannie stepped in front of Stott as he moved as if to leave the room in his high and virtuous heat.

"You can call the devil when we're through with you, Stott," she said.

"If Mackey's in this—"

"Mackey left Cottonwood last night, sir."

"We had a session with *him* yesterday afternoon, Henry. He sold his joint to Jud Springer last night."

Stott sat down again. Every word they said seemed to drive him a little lower, until he leaned forward, his head down, an ungainly, dispirited lump.

"Zeb Smith is drunk this morning, and locked up in a safe place," Texas added, speaking close to Stott's ear, as if in confidence. "He'll keep where he is without any sheriff."

"After you went to all that expense to have the wrong man killed, Henry," Fannie mocked, "and old Zeb came back to hold you up again."

"He's ready to go into court and swear he saw you shoot Ed McCoy. Now, if you want to fetch sheriffs into this case, sir, you can go right on and do it."

Stott sat up with a sudden wrench, making his chair complain.

"Nobody in this country would believe that drunken bum on oath, any more than they would you two buzzards!" he declared, seeming to gather a breath of new courage.

"It might be that a jury in a court-room wouldn't take much stock in him, sir, but a jury of cattlemen on the open range is a different set of men," said Texas very solemnly. "Mackey wasn't willing to take the chance, and he was only your hired hand."

"You can't prove it—you can't prove a word of it!"

"But we can prove southern cattle on you to a fare-you-well."

Stott sat in heavy meditation a little while, the two who had brought him to such unexpected and heavy judgment waiting silently by.

"It's blackmail—I'll never pay it!" he muttered.

"You couldn't hire us to touch a cent of your money, Stott," Texas corrected him, his voice like the word of judgment in the banker's ear.

"Then what do you want?" Stott appealed, lifting his miserable face, staring at them in a dumb wonder, turning his glance from one to the other of that unaccountable pair.

"There's an old debt that's stood cryin' to your

deaf ears many a day, Mr. Stott," Texas reminded him, "and this is the time you'll listen to its demands."

"What do you mean, Hartwell?"

"I mean the difference between six thousand legal debt and sixty thousand forged, with inter-ust from that day to this."

"You can't prove it!" said Stott again, weakly. "It can't be proved!"

"You might as well *call* it sixty thousand, to make it look better. We'll let you put any kind of a face to it you can think up, Stott, to save you in front of the world on that. You can send for Mrs. McCoy and count the cash money down in her hand, and tell her it's your gratitude for past favors done you by Ed McCoy, or that it's your heart moved by your great prosperity, or that you've got religion—or anything you want to tell her. That done, we cross off your crime and let you free on murder."

Stott sat thinking it over. Perhaps the turn that things took when they scorned his money put a newer and graver complexion on their case in his eyes; doubtless he realized that he couldn't make the plea of blackmail stick against them before the public. On their part, taking Mackey's skulking retreat into consideration, they could ruin him in an hour.

By the payment of the money to Mrs. McCoy as demanded by this unfathomable Texas stranger, his position would be strengthened against the shock of the cattlemen's discovery of his duplicity in running in the Texas herd. The glow of public approbation of such a deed would be warm and profitable. It would be almost worth the money—if these two dangerous people were out of the way.

There were many things for Stott to consider, indeed, in those hard-pressing moments. But behind all the argument that he could bring up to support a denial, plain and final, of their demand, stood the panic of his own guilty heart which cried out that no sacrifice was too dear to buy immunity from this ruinous exposure.

"What guarantee," he asked, with his business caution, "will I have, if I do what you say, that you'll get out of the country and keep still?"

"There are conditions to add, sir, before any guarantee at all will be given," Texas told him. "First, do what I tell you—send for Mrs. McCoy and pay her sixty thousand dollars, cash money. You brought back more than that with you this morning from the sale of that first bunch of southern cattle. Mrs. McCoy is at Uncle Boley Drumgoole's shop, waitin' on your message, sir."

"So you've told it all!"

Stott looked up sharply, his words the yelp of

a beaten whelp. There stood in his face the ghost of his guilty years, the specter that had haunted him with the dread of discovery since the day of his cowardly shot in the prairie silences, with the unseen Zeb Smith lying low behind a sumac-clump.

"She don't know anything about it, sir, nor what she's there for. Send for her; we'll leave it to you to deal square with her, believin' that it will be done."

"All right, Hartwell," Stott agreed, nodding his heavy head, the fright of his cowardly soul almost shriveling his gross body, "I promise you I'll deal it straight to Ed McCoy's women—I'll deal it straight."

"When you've paid her, cash money in hand, and refused to take a cent of it back on deposit in this bank if she offers it to you, you'll send word to Malcolm Duncan, or carry it to him yourself, that will clear me of the charge of sellin' out my honor and trust to the men that brought that southern herd up and run it over me, sir."

"Hartwell, I'll hand you five thousand dollars if you'll let things stand like they are on that, and leave the country."

Stott begged it of him abjectly, holding out his guilty hands.

Hartwell drew back a step hurriedly, away from

the possible contamination of Stott's unholy touch.

"You'll do what I set for you to do," he said sternly, "and bring back results within twenty-four hours, or you'll answer to me with your life!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE DARK HORIZON

HARTWELL and Fannie loitered along the street until they saw the bank teller leave Uncle Boley's shop with Mrs. McCoy; turned and walked back toward the bank after they had passed on the other side, and waited in that vicinity until the widow came out with the package in her hand.

Mrs. McCoy held straight for Uncle Boley's shop, walking rapidly. They followed, well behind her, and stood in front of Noggle's barber-shop, a little way down the street, waiting for her to leave. She had been in the shop but a minute when Uncle Boley came hurrying out, bare-headed, his beard broken loose from under his suspenders and flying in the wind. He looked round him this way and that, like a man who hears a swarm of bees, his hoary face tipped up to the sky.

Presently he popped back into the shop, only to come out again at once with his hat on and repeat his queer weather-observation antics. Texas stood enjoying the old soul's excited maneuvers, not fully understanding what they meant, but he believed

part of them related to a search of the heavens for the Angel Gabriel, part of them to a mundane exploration of the environs for himself.

"We'll go in here," he said.

Texas was in no mood for receiving either the credit or the thanks of Uncle Boley and Mrs. McCoy. He never wanted to be known in the transaction if he could keep his part in it covered, and the thought that it might come out on him before he could get away from Cottonwood made him cross. He cared little whether Noggle wanted his custom in that shop or not.

Noggle was contemplating the reflection of his own charms in the glass, adding a little powder here, smoothing an eyebrow there, giving a turn to the end of his long mustache with his beautiful soft fingrs. He turned with a hand still at the curling end of that adornment, to see who was breaking in upon his preening hour for a shave.

"Bennie, sit down and read the paper till I'm through," Texas directed.

"Good merning," said Noggle, pronouncing the good old word with a gimlet-hole sound. There would have been no distinction in saying it like everybody else in Cottonwood, and no style.

"Hi're you, sir?" Texas returned, his fingers busy with his cravat, his coat already on the hook. "I want a hair-cut and shave."

He spread himself out in the chair, and Noggle stood by as if he teetered on indecision.

"All right," he yielded at last, "all right. But it hurts a man's business—"

"Damn your fool business, sir!" said Texas, lifting his head savagely.

Noggle shrank back from him, pressing his hand to his mouth as if he had bitten his tongue. Over in the corner, where she stood looking at the cigarette cards tacked to the wall, Fannie laughed.

Noggle began to snip round the edges of Hartwell's long hair with his shears, pausing now and then to tap them on the back of the comb, for no apparent reason in the barbering world. Noggle could not be expected to hold silence very long, not even while clipping an undesirable customer, especially when he was itching all over inside with big news. But it was along toward the end of the hair-trimming that he melted enough to begin.

"Cowboy in here from the Diamond Tail this morning said the Texas fever's broke out over there," said he.

"That so?"

Texas spoke as if the news was of little concern to him, but Fannie turned with a sharp exclamation, looking at Noggle with big eyes.

"Lost twenty-odd two days ago," he said, "and spreadin' like fire."

"Too bad," said Texas, unmoved.

Noggle clipped on, nodding over Hartwell's head at Fannie, whose interest made her a better mark.

"Clean 'em out if it keeps on spreadin', they say, and make hard times here in the Arkansaw Valley. Well, the beauty of my business is, a man can pick up and foller the money."

"Did you say he was from the Diamond Tail?" Fannie asked.

"Yes, that's Sawyer's brand, you know. He said it was spreadin' in on the Open Hat, too. I guess somebody oncorked a bottle of hornets when they drove them Texas cattle in here!"

Nobody offered any word to combat or agree with the assertion. Noggle pressed his subject back into the chair and began to rub the lather into his chin, keeping time to the movement with his foot like a man playing a banjo.

"I wouldn't like to stand in the shoes of the man who was to blame for them tick-bringin' cattle gittin' on this range," he said. "Cowboy that was in here from the Diamond Tail—I give him a hair-cut, shave, shampoo, massage, and singe—said the cow-men was comin' in here in a day or two to look for the feller and handle him around some. If I knew who that man was I'd tip it off to him, as a friend, so he could make his gitaway."

"You're very kind and generous, sir," said

Texas, pushing Noggle's finger and thumb away from the hold on his upper lip; "and if I happen to meet the feller you speak of I'll pass the word on to him."

"A man owes something to a feller that's stood up for him," said the barber, but looking about him and craning his long neck to sweep the street and make sure that his words would not be heard by anybody through the open door; "and I'm one of the kind that remembers my friends, no matter if my business is apt to suffer by it."

"No man's business ever suffered very long because he had the honor to do what was right," Texas assured him, his opinion of the barber rising a considerable degree.

"I sent for Malvina and told her to pass the tip on to that feller if she saw him."

"You're a sport, Nick!" said Fannie warmly.

Noggle suspended his operations, razor lifted high, to look at her, a cast of hauteur on his narrow face.

"Time for you to begin shavin', if you're ever goin' to, kid," said he.

"I shave with a hot wagon-tire," Fannie said, turning to study the cigarette pictures again.

"Yes, and there's one feller in this town I'd like to shave with my six-shooter!"

Noggle looked steadily at Fannie, his chin thrust out, his powdered forehead wrinkled in a scowl. Perhaps he was trying the effect on her of an expression of fierceness which he had studied out before his mirror. If so, it looked as if he'd have to design a new one, for Fannie only laughed at him and turned her back.

"If you're hintin' at Zeb Smith, I can lead you to him," Texas offered.

"I don't want bloodshed, I don't want to git mixed up in any more of it if I can help it," said Noggle, as if his past had been drenched with the sanguinary fluid that waters human hearts, "but I ain't a goin' to hide out from no man, neither."

"I'll send him down to the shop, if it will oblige you any, sir."

"Don't you do it, don't you do it!" Noggle protested with undignified haste.

"If you don't wish it, sir—"

"I don't want to muss up the shop."

It takes a bluffer to color a thing like that with the significance, the unexpressed ferocity, that gives it weight. Noggle had practiced the art a long time; there wasn't a match for him between the Arkansas and the Rio Grande, with Zeb Smith in the contest.

"Yes, sir, I reckon they'll be some ground tore

up and bushes bent down the day you two meet," said Texas gravely, his hand in his pocket for the fee.

"Your money ain't good here," said Noggle generously.

"Sir, I insist on—"

"It don't pass in this shop, Texas. You know, there'll be a up-train at two ten, and a down-one at four nineteen. Or if you didn't want to wait that long, you might buy a horse."

"Yes, sir, I reckon it could be done."

"You could sell him up at Wichita, you know."

"I guess I might be able to sell him up there," said Texas, his head bent thoughtfully, his hand still in his pocket; "but I'll not have any need, thank you, sir. I'll be around here a day or two more."

On the street Texas faced toward Uncle Boley's shop.

"I'll go on down to the hotel," said Fannie.

"Uncle Boley he'll be wantin' to see you, Fannie."

"I'm not going up there, I tell you!" She spoke sharply, a surge of blood in her dark-stained face.

"You don't need to mind Uncle Boley," he persuaded.

Fannie stood rasping her spur over the end of a board in the sidewalk, stubbornly refusing to lift her head.

"That McCoy kid'll be up there, suckin' a stick of candy!" she said.

"Why, Miss Fannie!"

"Oh, it's all right, Texas—go on up and see her," she said, her voice trembling, her face turned away. "She's a good kid, I haven't got anything against her. Go on up and see her if you want to."

"Fannie, you mustn't think that way about me. Miss McCoy can't be anything in this world to me."

"You care for her—you care a whole lot for her!"

"Her way and mine, Fannie—"

"I gave you my cards and you played them for *her*—you thought of her all the time!"

"You didn't want me to hold Stott up—that *would* have been blackmail, Fannie."

"You held him up for her!"

"That wasn't a hold-up, it was restitution. Stott owed them; he didn't owe you and me anything that money would pay."

Fannie thought it over a little while, then she turned frankly to him, her hand extended, a smile on her lips, a struggle in her throat to hold down the tears.

"I know it, Texas. I've run with crooks so long I can't see straight all at once."

"You're all right, Fannie; you're as straight as a plumb-line."

"No, money wouldn't square what Stott owes you and me, Texas. I guess we'll have to cross that off—if I'm going to *stay* square."

"We've got to cross off a lot of things in this world," sighed he.

"Yes, when you stand clean and think square, I guess you have, kid. You're clean—it isn't hard for you. So is that girl with the big brown eyes. Maybe if I was—"

"You're as square as a die!" he protested.

"Oh, go on up and see her!" said Fannie crossly.

There were not many people in the street at that hour of the forenoon, and the few who passed behind them where they stood on the edge of the sidewalk facing into the street heeded them no more than they would have any pair of cowboys. They were as much alone, indeed, as they would have been in seclusion, as far as public notice was concerned. Texas put his hand on her shoulder and looked into her face.

"Fannie, there's no reason why I should go to Uncle Boley's, not any more at all, as I know of. We'll go back to the *ho*-tel, and set down and talk things over, for our roads are beginning to stretch out from the forks, and we'll be ridin' our ways, far apart, di-rec'ly."

Again Texas saw that convulsive struggle in her throat, and her head was bent, her face turned from him, as if she was ashamed to let him see that there were tears on her cheeks, and her eyes half-blinded in their hot rain.

"All right, Texas," she said.

When they came to the hotel, Texas stopped, his shoulders back, his chin lifted, as if he turned his face up to feel the rain after a drought. The strong southern breeze lifted his broad hat-brim.

"The wind's blowin' right up from Taixas this morning; you can taste the taste of home in it," said he. "Wouldn't you like to take a little walk on out a-past the houses, Fannie, where it can come to you clean?"

For answer she started forward, and he walked beside her, looking now and then with all the compassion of his soul into her face. She did not turn her eyes to meet his, but kept on at his side, her great spurs clashing over the uneven planks, her head bent as if sorrow had descended upon her and wrapped her in its cloud.

They turned from the unfenced highway well beyond the last house of Cottonwood, and sat on a little knoll, where the wind from Texas came blowing free, full of the indefinable spices of autumn, soft and beguiling, and home-calling as a maiden's song.

"I wish I had my hair," said she, after a long silence.

"It was too bad to cut it off thataway, Fannie. Couldn't it 'a' been combed out?"

"Maybe."

"It was the finest hair I ever saw on a lady's head, bar none. Well, it'll grow out again, Fannie."

"Yes," she said, "it'll grow out, but you'll be gone then, Texas."

"Yes, I'll be gone."

"If I'd known for sure you were here I wouldn't have had it cut. But I didn't know whether you were alive or dead, and I was afraid to come back a girl. Between them, Stott and Mackey would have killed me, Texas."

"I wouldn't put it past them."

"Yes, and I'll tell you, Texas, Stott won't own up to the cattlemen to clear you. He'll wiggle out of it some way."

"I'll call him up to the lick-log in the morning."

"He'll not be afraid of us now, since he's paid that money back to the McCoys; he'll tell us to go to hell."

"Maybe he will, Fannie."

"Nobody will believe a man as generous as him would shoot his pardner in the back. I guess we

cut the string and let him go when we put that up to him, Texas."

"Well, it's done; he owed the money, and it's paid—I reckon it's paid."

Fannie rolled over on the grass, stretched herself on her stomach, propping herself on her elbows. She chewed a joint of bluestem, and took her hat off to let the wind have its way, saying nothing for a long time. Then:

"Texas?"

"Yes, Fannie."

"Don't you think you ought to take the train out of here to-day?"

"I'm not runnin' away from any man, or set of men, Fannie. I'm not ready to leave just now."

"Stott won't tell the cattlemen you're square, Texas, and they'll get you. They'll be in here fifty to one, and you'll never have a show for your money at all."

"If Stott don't clear me, I'll have to do it myself, Fannie. I've got an appointment with a man that's undertaken to settle it in his own way for the rest of them. That's one reason why I can't leave till he comes."

Fannie got up, looking at him with a question in her frightened eyes.

"What man, Texas?"

"His name is Winch. I don't reckon you know him."

The name seemed to daze her. She sat staring at him, her lips open, her eyes distended, her breath held as if she listened.

"I've been hearing about him for years. He'll never give you a square deal, Texas—he never gave any man a square deal. Dee Winch is as crooked as a snake!"

CHAPTER XXII

A RENDEZVOUS WITH DEATH

IT was late that evening when the news began to fly around Cottonwood that Johnnie Mackey had transferred his interests to Jud Springer and quit the town in the dark. It was the biggest sensation that Cottonwood ever had experienced. Even the thrashing of the mayor became a secondary incident in the town's history, and in the minds of the knowing ones merely a forerunning branch of this great event. For, closely as their meeting with Mackey had been guarded, there were some who were aware of it, and Texas and the dark little stranger were at once clothed with a mysterious importance that lifted them to a conspicuous situation in the public eye.

Detectives, it was generally said they were, who had a line on Mackey's past, brought in by Jud Springer for the purpose of smoking him out. Springer got the credit for it; nobody ever had heard of a shrewder business move.

The town remained awake longer than usual to talk about it, the citizens and visitors shifting from one of Jud Springer's gaping doors to the other,

almost everybody rejoicing in the overthrow of Mackey, who had made his office a position of oppression. On account of public felicitation, and the unusual celebration among the normally staid and domesticated citizens, the town was drowsy next morning and asleep later than its accustomed hour.

Cattlemen began to arrive before the sun had struck down to the door lintels of the stores, and before anything but the restaurants and all-night saloons was open. Several came to the Woodbine Hotel for breakfast, and Mrs. Goodloe was showing more teeth than a shark.

Hartwell was up early, waiting the opening of the bank, to exact justice, and the fulfillment of his agreement, from Stott. Back and forth, like a sentry, he walked a short beat opposite the bank, waiting the opening-hour. People who recognized him in passing spoke with respect, and turned in curiosity to look at him again, wondering what new eruption was to come in the business of Cottonwood out of that early patrolling in the street.

Hartwell was concerned over the arrival of the cattlemen, whose horses were already thick along the hitching-racks up and down the street. These had come from near-by ranches, as the freshness of their animals told, and there was none among them

who seemed to recognize him, no one whom Hartwell identified as a member of the recent expedition against the Texans.

There was one advantage of having a crowd of them in town looking for him, at any rate—Stott's audience would be the larger for his confession, if he had not already made it to Duncan. His distrust of Stott, stirred by Fannie's declaration that he never would implicate himself by his own confession to clear another, had grown through the night. Hartwell was uneasy over the outlook now, for if Winch should come in before the bank opened it would mean a fight, and the useless sacrifice of one or the other of their lives.

It wanted a few minutes of nine o'clock when Major Simmonds, the teller, arrived, his hat at a gallant slant. He unlocked the door with high importance, swung it back, and put the brick against it, and disappeared behind the grill. Hartwell roamed anxious eyes up and down the street, watching for Stott, determined to go across and stop him before he could get into the bank.

He was thus engaged in his survey of the street when Major Simmonds came rushing out, bareheaded, hair disarranged from the bald spot which he took such studious care to conceal. Hartwell was the nearest person to him, directly across the

street. Major Simmonds came running toward him, making a signal with his flapping arms like a switchman stopping a train.

"The bank's robbed!" he yelled, stopping in the middle of the street. Hartwell hurried to him.

"What's that?"

"Robbed—cleaned out—vault open, everything gone!"

"Run for Stott—I'll call the marshal!"

Texas hurried off toward the little calaboose, behind which the town marshal lived, and the teller started off to summon Stott, leaving the bank door wide open. People who had heard the shouted alarm came running, and when Texas returned with the marshal in a few minutes the street before the gaping bank door was filled by the crowd of deeply concerned patrons.

The marshal posted himself in the door, refusing to allow even the anxious directors of the concern to enter until the arrival of Stott. The teller came panting back presently, his face white, his eyes fairly hanging on his cheeks.

"Gone!" said he.

A big gray man in a grocer's apron laid hold of the teller's shoulder and shook him, as if to settle him down to coherency.

"Gone? Who's gone?" he shouted.

"Stott!" the teller groaned.

"Where's his wife?" another anxious-faced business man inquired, pushing forward.

"She left for Kansas City yesterday afternoon."

"Oh. well, Stott's around town somewhere, then," said the grocer. "Come on, we've got to find him."

A general alarm for Stott went through the town, on the heels of the news that the bank had been robbed, and everything down to the last security carried off. The marshal held his place in the door, and would not allow anybody to enter until it became a determined fact that Stott was gone.

Then the directors took possession of the concern, to find that the president's hand, and no other, had cleaned it to the crumbs. There was no doubt about that; he had left his mark behind him in a hundred ways. He had left nothing but a heap of silver representing a few hundred dollars, too heavy and unprofitable to carry away.

Hartwell turned away from the sullen crowd that waited the final announcement of the bank's directors, feeling the defalcation and flight of the banker as keenly as any man whose all was on deposit there. Stott had robbed them only of their money, and a man could replace that if he lived long enough, and denied himself, and good fortune kept its hand over him; but a man who had been robbed of his main chance of saving his honor had been left bankrupt beyond repair.

The only temporary advantage of the situation was that it drew the thoughts of the cattlemen from himself to Stott, for most of them were depositors of the bank. There was hurried mounting among them, fevered riding away to spread the alarm, for Stott had not left by railroad. He had either gone toward the Nation, heading for No Man's Land, or in the direction of Wichita, where he would take a train on his flight to the security of Canada. On the chance that he might cross some line of information before he got away, the directors telegraphed his description abroad.

Hartwell had not seen Fannie that morning. He turned to the hotel now to look for her.

"He was up before you, Texas, and et only a snack of breakfast," Mrs. Goodloe told him. "I saw him ride past a little while afterward, headin' south."

"Some business of his own, I guess," said Texas.

"He paid his bill like he wasn't comin' back."

"The little rascal—to go off thataway and never leave me a word! Oh, well, I reckon he'll be around di-rec'ly."

"I'll bet he's gone to see his girl. He had a pinin' look in his eye like a boy that was in love. He's a nice quiet little feller, as soft-spoken as a woman."

"Pure gold, ma'am, right down to the tacks of his boots."

Texas was troubled over Fannie's peculiar behavior as he walked toward Uncle Boley's shop. Perhaps she believed that things were finished for her in Cottonwood and had gone back to her cousin's ranch. It might be that what he had said about their ways beginning already to part had something to do with it. Maybe she had gone away thinking that he was selfish and ungrateful. Remorse at this thought came over him, to make that dark hour more bitter.

It wasn't like Fannie to leave him as long as there might be need of her testimony to clear him in the cattlemen's eyes, and she did not know at the hour she left that Stott had cleaned out the bank and gone. Something had urged her upon her lonely road, but Texas was not vain enough, sophisticated enough, even to consider that it might be her love for him, hopeless as she knew it to be.

Uncle Boley was in his door, looking down the street toward the bank. He had his apron on, and his beard tucked out of the way, signs which told Texas that he had left the bench but lately, and did not intend to allow the rascality of Henry Stott to rise up between him and his work very long.

"Well, he's run off, has he?" Uncle Boley in-

quired, his bright eyes livelier for the excitement, his voice eager.

"Yes, and everything gone with him that he could lay his ornery hands on, Uncle Boley."

"Serves 'em right for trustin' to that man. He never done an honest deed in his life 'cept when he was druv to it, and then it went so hard agin the grain you could hear him crack. I tell you, Texas, when this town finds out what you and that girl made him do for that widder woman yesterday it'll rair up and whoop."

"You didn't tell her—Mrs. McCoy—that we had any hand in it, did you, Uncle Boley?"

Texas asked him the question with such haste and eagerness that it was almost a plea.

"You know I never," said Uncle Boley, reproachfully. "When I pass my word to a man it sticks."

"I know it, Uncle Boley, and I beg your pardon, sir. I was nearly in a fit when I thought maybe they'd found out."

"It'd do you a hell of a lot of harm if they had!" Uncle Boley was sharply sarcastic. He spat on the sidewalk, and worked his mouth in that chopping manner so alarming to behold by one who did not know his ways.

"Well, this town it'll never think any better of me for it, Uncle Boley. That scoun'rel sneaked

off and left me holdin' the sack, never said one word to them cattlemen that'll clear me."

"No, I don't reckon he did," said Uncle Boley, thoughtfully. "It wasn't to be expected of him. I see them cow-men ridin' in here early, and they're all stirred up, they tell me, 'count of fever breakin' out on the range."

"They're comin' in for a settlement with me, I've been told, Uncle Boley. This is the day of the big doin's, I guess."

"Yes, I was told; the news has went around. Well, where's that Fannie girl?"

Texas told him that she had gone, with no word behind her.

"What do you reckon got into her to fly up and leave that way?"

"I don't know, Uncle Boley, unless she felt hurt, sir, because she thought I was ungrateful for all she'd helped me to do, for all I never could 'a' done, sir, without her help."

Uncle Boley shook his head, bent over his work, shook his head again from time to time, through a long interval of silence.

"It wasn't that, Texas. She left because she was jealous. One agin the other, and you lost both of 'em. Well, you wasn't to blame; it just come out that way."

"I bungled it up so, sir!" said Texas, regret-

fully. "I always was as clumsy as a colt for gettin' my legs tangled up in the rope."

"Well, if Sallie don't come on her knees to you when she finds out what you've done for her and her mother, I'll take in my horns."

Texas put his hand on the old man's shoulder and looked him earnestly in the face.

"Uncle Boley, the best kindness you can do me is never to mention my name in that matter to them. Give Fannie the full credit for it; it rightly belongs to her. As she said, she gave me the cards —all I did was play them. Keep my name out of it the same as if I was a man that'd been hung."

"I don't see what you're goin' to gain by that," said Uncle Boley impatiently.

"There's nothing to *be* gained, one way or the other. I'll have to walk out there in the road direc'ly, sir, and face them cattlemen, for no man nor set of men's ever goin' to say they come a lookin' for me and I couldn't be found. I'll go out there and I'll face 'em, Uncle Boley, and I'll do my best for the sake of the land I come from, and the right that I know is on my side."

"It ain't right for you to have to go that way, Texas," the old man protested, "and you a burnin' your heart up for Sallie."

Texas did not deny it. He sat with drooping head, leaning forward a bit, dejection over him,

his world so dark that he could not see more than the length of his arm ahead. And what he looked on then was only a world of strife.

A picture of a man staggering backward, his hands outflung, his gun falling by his side, persisted in his mental vision against the background of men and horses and dust in the trampled street. This was a picture that did not change, that he could not divert his faculties from for one hour of complete peace. The central figure in it was always the same, and that falling man was Texas Hartwell, a death-wound in his breast.

"If you come through it, Texas, *then* what're you aimin' to do?"

Uncle Boley had put down his work, for the gloom of that threatening hour was heavy over his heart. He pulled his beard from under his suspender and spread it on his breast, sure indication that his work for that morning was at an end. Texas sat up stiffly, his eyes fixed as in a dream on the little window looking dustily into the street.

"Sir, I'm goin' to straddle a horse and take out after that pore little bird that's gone off draggin' her broken wings, and I'm a goin' to foller her till I find her, and if I can make her glad I'll do it, no matter what it costs."

Uncle Boley was moved by this declaration, almost to the point of panic. If Texas had been his

son he could not have felt a sharper pang at his declared intention of allowing gratitude to push his life's promise all behind him, and go riding away on a quest like that.

"If Fannie was a *good* woman, Texas!" said he, a pathetic tenderness in his trembling voice.

"A woman don't have to be very good to be better than a man, Uncle Boley."

"And even if she *was* a good woman you couldn't give her your heart. It'd be a sin to throw yourself away on Fannie."

"I could give her a man's name and protection, and I could lift her pore face up to the sky."

"God help you, son, if you're set on doin' that!"

"Never mind," said Texas, soothingly, "never mind it at all. When I'm gone from here, no matter which way I leave, cross me out and turn over the leaf."

Uncle Boley turned to the row of boots on the little shelf, took them down, boot by boot, and wiped the dust from them on his sleeve. He kept his back turned toward Texas, for tears were rolling down his beard.

"Well, I declare, Uncle Boley, sir, if I didn't clean forget that old ant-eater we shut up here night before last!" said Texas, starting up.

"He's gone—slep' off his drunk about sundown yesterday and come walkin' out. Stopped to cuss

me, place of thankin' me for his lodgin'. I've seen some ornery men in my time, but I never seen one that had all the ornery p'ints Zeb Smith's got."

"He'll not be needed, anyhow, it's just as well he's gone. He's lost his boardin'-house pass, now Stott's left; he'll have to rack out and hunt him up once more."

"I hear Ollie Noggle's packin' a gun for him."

"I expect Zeb'll live to be a mighty old man if he waits till Noggle bores a hole in him, Uncle Boley."

"I reckon he will."

Texas stood in the door. Down the street where there had been so much excitement and activity an hour before, all was quiet. Few horses remained hitched at the racks before saloons and stores, the midday somnolence of ordinary times having settled over Cottonwood again. Many of the cattlemen had gone riding for the trail of Henry Stott, the business that had brought them to town so early having been driven from their thoughts by this new calamity.

For a while Texas was more than half in the mind to buy a horse and strike out at once after Fannie, and leave that tangle of trouble behind. But he could not outrun it very long. A blot would remain on his name to spread and enlarge after him, and reach again to him in time, no matter

where he might go in the world of cattle. And there was no other world for him, no other pursuit of which he was master enough to make a bluff of living by.

On the other hand, staying on there for the violent adjustment that the cattlemen were bent on making might never lead to anything more than his death. The waters of his disgrace would close above his grave, never to be parted again. So he stood weighing it, and a man came riding around the corner below him, and turned his horse toward the Woodbine Hotel.

There was no mistaking the rider, for, once seen in the saddle, Dee Winch was not to be forgotten. His traits on horse-back were as marked as his peculiarities on foot.

Dee Winch it was. He had come to keep his appointment and carry out his word. Winch would go straight to the hotel looking for him, for he had sent word to the little man-slayer that he would find him there when wanted.

Winch should not be disappointed. Hartwell would keep the engagement as honestly as a lover. All thought of riding away from Cottonwood dissolved from his mind, all the business of life that involved him sprung to a sudden point. He was conscious suddenly of an unaccountable lightness, of a relief from a long and heavy strain. Dee

Winch should not look for him in vain, a sneer on his thin lip, his protruding teeth laid bare. Life's business had come to a sudden head. His adventure lay before him; he was no longer a listening man.

"They're thinning out down there, most of them's gone," said Texas, turning to the old man, speaking with his accustomed slowness and serenity. "I'm goin' to step down to the *ho*-tel a minute, sir, and see if Fannie didn't leave a letter for me that they over-looked."

Uncle Boley went to the door and looked out, and seemed relieved by the appearance of placidity that had fallen again over the town.

"Well, you'll be back in a little while I reckon, Texas?"

"I'll be back almost di-rec'ly, Uncle Boley," Texas replied, standing a moment with his foot on the step to smile before he turned away to keep his rendezvous with Winch.

CHAPTER XXIII

SACRIFICE SUPREME

WINCH had disappeared when Texas started to the hotel. Texas believed he had gone to the livery stable to leave his horse, doubtless having returned to Cottonwood with the intention of making a considerable stay.

Mrs. Goodloe was in the hotel office, gasping and shaking her head, and laboring to express to herself her astonishment and grief over the shocking downfall of Cottonwood's financial pillar. She was wearing a new plaid waist that morning, with most surprising effect on her facial peculiarities, and this, together with the excitement under which she labored, had turned her into the homeliest human that Hartwell had ever seen.

"Ain't it awful about Henry Stott?" she said, as Texas appeared in the door.

"Not so bad for him, I guess, ma'am, as the folks he's robbed."

"No, hangin's too good for that man if they ketch him. Malvina, she's in her room cryin' her eyes out over the seven hundred dollars she had in the

bank, and her slavin' nearly five years to git ahead that much over payin' for the house."

"You don't tell me, ma'am! I didn't know she was a depositor, but I reckon most everybody was."

"Ollie had ninety dollars, there, too. He's sorry now he didn't cut Stott's throat the last time he had him in his chair, and he'd 'a' done it, too, if he'd 'a' knowed what was in his rascally mind!"

"Has he gone out with the posse to hunt for track of Stott?"

"No, he's over at the shop. Zeb Smith's roamin' around agin, out of a job since Mackey sold and skipped."

"He's a mighty ornery man, ma'am."

"Yes, and Ollie says he ain't worth killin', but he knows he'll have to do it before he'll have any peace."

"Has anybody been in lookin' for me, ma'am?"

"No, Texas; nobody ain't."

"I'm goin' up to my room to write a letter, and I wish you'd call me if anybody comes askin'."

"Sure I will, Texas."

Hartwell had little business to leave behind him if he should be summoned suddenly from the world, but what there was he wanted to set straight. There was a shadowy possibility that something might come in time out of the present worthless investments in Kansas City. The deeds to these mel-

ancholy stretches of vacant fields he had carried in his blanket roll when he came to Cottonwood. Now he wrapped them and addressed them to his sister, with a letter for Malvina, directing her to post the packet in the event of his death.

That done, he polished his boots, put on his black coat, and prepared himself to quit this life with dignity and decency, according to the way that he had lived it. He was brushing his hat by the window when he saw Fannie ride by, just catching an identifying glimpse of her in the angling view that his window gave of the street.

He thrust the papers, which he wanted them to find on his dead body if he should fall, into the breast pocket of his coat and hurried down-stairs. When he reached the street, Fannie was half way to Uncle Boley's and, coming from the opposite direction a little way beyond her, Dee Winch, turning his head from side to side as he rode, as if searching for somebody among the people on the walks.

It was all to make a show and a parade of it beforehand, this riding around on the pretense that he had to seek him out, thought Texas, as suddenly resentful over the little gun-slinger's behavior as if he had slapped him in the face. Winch must have known where to look for him all the time. Even if his messenger had failed to return Hart-

well's answer to him, he had only to inquire in passing where to find the man whom he sought.

Hartwell hurried along the comparatively empty sidewalk, keeping to the outer edge to make himself conspicuous in Winch's eyes. Fannie was about a hundred yards ahead of him, riding in a slow walk.

Texas noted that a considerable number of cattlemen had returned to town. Among them he recognized several who had been in the party that rode to turn the Texas invaders, and these looked hard at him, and stood together talking and watching him after he had passed. Their action and numbers concerned him little now. Winch was before him; the long waiting and listening were at an end. Up the street he saw Uncle Boley in front of his shop, his black alpaca coat on, his beard about him like a fog.

About midway between the old man and Hartwell, Fannie and Winch met. A moment before she passed him, Fannie jerked her horse sharply and rode in front of Winch, changing her course so abruptly that the animals almost collided. This threw her on the left-hand side of Winch, and, as she came face to face with him, she raised her quirt with her left hand and struck him a sharp blow across the face.

CHAPTER XXIV

TRAGEDY

EVEN at the distance which divided them, Hartwell heard the blow fall. He bounded forward as her purpose in this affront came to him in a flash.

"Winch, Winch! That's a woman!" he shouted as he ran.

Winch did not heed. That he heard there could be no doubt, for several cattlemen ahead of Hartwell repeated the warning to the infuriated gunslinger.

Almost instantly, almost simultaneously, two shots sounded out of the confusion of trampling horses and rising dust. And there was Winch standing beside his fallen horse, his smoking revolver in his hand; beyond him a rod, lying in the dust of the road, Fannie Goodnight, her arms stretched wide, her face upon the ground. Her frightened horse was galloping away with flying stirrups; Winch was standing with his arm crooked, his gun half raised, as if he waited for her to move.

A moment, like figures revealed by a lightning stroke, those who stood in the street saw this picture.

Then Hartwell leaped into it, a cry in his throat like the voice of despairing pain.

Winch did not change the position of his body, which was three-quarters full toward Hartwell. With a little slinging jerk of his gun he fired, then staggered back, his arms outflung, his weapon dropped from his hand. Three bullets from Hartwell's pistol struck him in the breast before he touched the ground.

Fannie was breathing when Hartwell lifted her and ran with her to Uncle Boley's shop, the people pressing behind him with the senseless curiosity of cattle. Uncle Boley shut the door on them. Texas carried her into the old man's room and laid her on his bed.

Uncle Boley went out the back door, after one quick look at Fannie's face, to bring the doctor. Texas bent over her, his heart melting with unutterable emotions, and bathed her face, and spoke to her in endearing whispers broken by his grief. He opened her shirt and disclosed her wound, down in her white bosom toward her heart, below the dark stain that disguised the fairness of her face and neck.

Fannie opened her eyes, quite unexpectedly, and smiled. There was blood on her lips; he wiped it away.

"Did I get him, Texas?" she asked.

"Yes honey, you got him."

She closed her eyes, and a weary placidity settled over her face.

"I went out to get him, Texas, before he—could get—you."

The last of it trailed away as if it blended with death. He took her hand and pressed it to his bosom, murmuring endearments to her in the panic of his grief. She reached up and touched his face; clasped her cold hands about his neck. He bent with her gentle pressure and kissed her lips.

So she smiled, and died, peace in her face, as if absolution had come to her soul in that caress. Hartwell bowed his head on her poor breast in agony that rent his heart.

Hartwell joined Uncle Boley in the shop after a while, unashamed of the traces of grief in his face.

"She was pure gold, Uncle Boley, as true a friend as a man ever had in this world," said he.

Uncle Boley was sitting in front of the door, as if on guard, trouble in his face, his shoemaker's hammer on the floor beside him.

"Did she speak to you before she went, Texas?"

Texas told him what she had said. Uncle Boley looked up, his face bright with admiration, his eyes tender for the great sacrifice that she had made.

"She went out to hunt him, and left early for fear you'd stop her."

"Yes, sir, that's what she did."

"She picked a fuss with him, thinkin' she could kill him and stop him from hurtin' you."

"She did just that, Uncle Boley, God bless her little heart!"

Uncle Boley got up and moved about the shop under the stress of his great emotion. Now and then he shook his head, and he was busy with his handkerchief about his eyes.

"You can't beat 'em, can't beat 'em!" said he. "When they're true, they're above anything that a man can conceive of, and when they ain't, they're hell-fire and mustard! Hell-fire and mustard, Texas, when they ain't."

"Yes, sir, I guess that's so."

"And I said she wasn't a good woman! Lord forgive me—that's what I said about that little Fannie!" He started toward the bedroom door, stopped, turned back. "Did you cover her face up, son?"

"Yes, sir, I covered her pore little face up from the light of this unkind world."

"I'm not fit to," said Uncle Boley, bowing his old white head, "not fit to touch her foot!"

"I suppose there'll be an inquiry into this by the coroner, and I'll be held to answer for my part

in it, sir, accordin' to law, till it's cleared up and dismissed."

"I reckon so. And that ain't half of it. Them cowmen they're growlin' around and talkin' about comin' up here and handlin' you, Texas. The doctor overheard a good deal of their talk, and I don't like the looks of things. That's why I was settin' there in the door with that hammer. I was goin' to brain the first man that tried to put a hand on you!"

Texas went to the door. It was past the noon hour and the visiting cattlemen had cleared out of the streets, seeking the restaurants for dinner, leaving their horses to gnaw hitching poles, according to their established way.

"I'll go down and get the undertaker to care for Fannie's body," he said, "and after that I'll hunt up the marshal and see if he wants to lock me up till the coroner's jury sets. I'm tired, Uncle Boley, clean through to the bone."

"I reckon it's the best thing to do," Uncle Boley agreed. "I'll watch over her, Texas, as tender as if she was flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. To-morrow we'll lay her away. I'll go up and see the preacher about her funeral as soon as the undertaker comes."

"No preacher ever had a chance to do a nobler office in this world."

Texas went on to the hotel after his visit to the undertaker, not having been able to find the town marshal. A number of cattlemen were at dinner there, singularly silent for men of such boisterous manner. Like some other people in the world that day, Texas reflected, they had enough to think about to make them serious.

He did not give more than a passing thought to the threats which Uncle Boley had heard they were making against him, for he knew that it was inevitable that such murmuring should attend the killing of a man. It was no more to him than the blowing of the wind, sore as he was in heart that hour.

He went to his room, where he sat in the gloom of dejection, the past a seeming waste behind him, the future a blank curtain which he had no desire left in him to move aside and pass. There was no regret for the slaying of Dee Winch. That seemed to him such a small incident in the turmoil of the past few hours that it might have been the deed of any other man than himself. It had no personal connection; it seemed but an isolated and inconsequential happening in which he was only technically concerned.

The big thing that filled the day was the sacrifice that Fannie had made of her life. Nobly conceived, generously carried out, but so pathetic-

ally useless, so sorrowfully mistaken. Still, Dee Winch might have killed him if they had met face to face without the vengeance for that hideous deed to quicken Hartwell's hand. This he considered, also, his heart dead within him, his head bowed down in grief.

So that matter was finished, and his business was done in Cottonwood, sad business for the greater part, for which time had been saving him, it seemed. He must leave now with the taint of treason on him, for there was no word to be lifted in his behalf but his own. Whatever burst of sun had come into his days there had ended quickly in storm. There were goldenrod and brown eyes, and a little thread of new hope that his heart had begun to weave. These were to be remembered—sentimental trifles to be shut up in the book which he was about to close, and put away forever.

He sat wrapped in his thoughts a long time, too heavy with sorrow, too dumb from the shock of the tragedy, to care to move a foot. Below he heard the sound of feet coming and going, and the sound of strong voices as the men stood in front of the hotel and discussed the events which they had ridden to share in Cottonwood that day.

Malvina was at his door—he knew her step as she came up the stairs, quick and light as a girl's.

He opened to her, to see her eyes big with fear, her cheeks pale.

"Malcolm Duncan and them men—they want you, Texas!" she whispered.

"All right, Mrs. Noggle. Please say to them I'll be right straight down."

"Oh, my God! They'll kill you, Texas," she moaned. "They've been talkin' about it—it's no secret in town—they'll kill you, I know they will!"

Texas was buckling on his gun. Her message had stirred a new desire in him, a fierce and savage desire to swim back to the shore of peace and safety through a wild turmoil of strife. If they wanted a fight they could have it, and a fight that some of them would remember above all the combats of their lives. Right here and now accounts between him and the drovers of the Arkansas Valley range would be adjusted for good and all.

"Maybe they will kill me," he said, calmly, reaching for his long black coat which he had flung down on the bed.

"Go down the back stairs," she whispered, leaning into the room, "walk easy—I'll make a noise when I go down!"

Texas turned to her with a smile, offering her his hand.

"Thank you, ma'am, for your good intention, but

I'm not a backdoor man. I'm under favors to you for the many kindnesses you've done for me in this house. If they happen to get me, ma'am, there's money of mine left with Uncle Boley to pay you what I owe. Good-by, ma'am, and kindest wishes forever."

His heart was soft for the simple woman who had defied public sentiment to befriend him. Her faith had been like a flower in the desert. She was crying against the wall beside his door when he left her, and the sound of her sobbing reached him as he went down the stairs, like the grief of a mother who sees her son borne away to the grave.

Malcolm Duncan was standing just within the office door. Beyond him Hartwell saw many others blocking his way to the street. But he did not turn his eyes about, nor consider any other passage from the house. They had sent for him, and he had come, and his way lay straight ahead of him, as lays a man's way always when his conscience is clear.

Duncan stepped forward to meet Hartwell, holding out his hand.

"Texas, I want to apologize to you publicly, on my own account and on behalf of the Cattle Raisers' Association," he said.

Hartwell was so wrenched by this unexpected

turn that he stopped, drew back a step, as if he struggled to adjust his equilibrium to the sudden reeling of the earth beneath his feet.

It was a thing to take a man's breath, and spring a question in his mind, to be met by a friendly hand where he expected to face hostile guns. Hartwell couldn't grasp it for a second or two. He left Duncan standing with his hand outstretched. Then a great warm surge of thankfulness, of peace, of reborn desire, came flooding over him. He took Duncan's hand.

"Sir, I didn't come down expectin' this," he said.

"You came down expectin' a fight, Hartwell, and I'm mighty glad it turned out you didn't have to do it. You'd 'a' gone through us like a hot iron through a paper sack from the way you looked."

"I'm thankful that it turned out otherwise," Texas told him, solemnly.

"I've found out the truth about them southern cattle, and I'm here to own up that we slandered and wronged you about as bad as a man can be slandered and wronged in this part of the country, Hartwell."

"It's generous and square of you to say that, sir, and it's all past and forgotten, as far as I'm concerned. It hurt for a while though, gentlemen—it hurt me to the heart!"

Malvina was on the stairs behind him. When Texas said that she caught her breath with a sharp sob, and came down, half blinded by her tears, and touched him on the shoulder as she passed. Mrs. Goodloe was big in the dining-room door, and behind her was Viney Kelly, who had been called in to help serve the tables during the unusually heavy dinner trade. Other cattlemen came crowding into the office to shake hands with Texas, who met them in hearty sincerity.

"Word from Stott reached me this morning," Duncan explained. "It was delayed in reaching me, for I was out at the camp with the boys. If I'd 'a' got it two hours sooner, things wouldn't have ended the way they have."

"Yes, sir, it would have saved the life of one of the best and truest women that ever walked the earth!"

Hartwell flashed his eyes around as he said it, and drew himself up like a soldier, proud to stand the champion of Fannie Goodnight before the world.

"I did the best I could, Hartwell," said Duncan, gently.

"I know it, sir. It just had to happen so, arranged from the start for her, I guess. Life was a sort of mockery all the way through for her. The best it had to give it always fetched around too late."

Nobody mentioned his fight with Winch, for all felt that there was a certain taint of guilt attaching to them on that score. Winch had come to town that morning representing the cattlemen; his vengeance was their vengeance, his creed their creed. They were ashamed of it now, but all of them were men, after a certain rude standard, and none sought to excuse himself of responsibility.

They talked freely of their past animosity toward Texas, and of the fever which the southern cattle had spread on the range. By shifting their herds they were holding it down; it was the hope that a frost or two would see the end of it without any great loss.

The city marshal came in presently, adding his congratulations with friendly effusion.

"I've fixed it up with the coroner, Texas," he said, "and there won't be any inquest. I told him there wasn't no use puttin' the county to that expense for a carcass like Dee Winch—it's cost the county enough already buryin' men he's killed. A hundred people saw him shoot first; it was as plain a case of self-defense as ever happened in this town."

For all of which Texas expressed his gratitude in his warm, extravagant Southern fashion. The marshal went on about his business with his chest out, proud of the opportunity that had brought him

into such prominent touch with Cottonwood's most notable hero.

Business men whom he never had met stopped in during the cattlemen's levee to shake hands with Hartwell. But after the first flush of satisfaction in feeling himself cleared, Texas began to settle back into the shadows of his melancholy. For there was one who did not come to add her felicitations when all the rest of the community seemed glad of his restoration to his place among honorable men.

Ranchers continued to arrive, for the news of Stott's pillage of the bank had spread. Men who went out in the morning to pick up his trail were returning, reporting no trace. It was the belief now that he had boarded a freight train that had stopped at Cottonwood for water in the early hours of the night, and had escaped their hands.

Texas yielded to Mrs. Goodloe's pressure at last and went in for his dinner, to be attended by Viney Kelly in a white waist with a gold locket hung round her neck on a slender red ribbon. He was the only occupant of the dining-room, for the hour was long past that of the regular dinner.

Viney had little to say as she carried in the food and shifted the dishes about with ready hand, but she attempted a bit of pleasantry when it came to the choice of a drink.

"Tay or caffee?" she asked, affecting the dialect which was her lawful heritage, adding quickly: "Say caffee—we have no tay."

"Caffee it is then," said he, struggling to be genial through his fog of melancholy gray.

Viney came with the coffee and went back for the pie. When she arrived with this she stood close by Hartwell's elbow, wiping the rim of the plate around carefully with her apron. Then she put the pie down before him and fell back a step, but to reach again and slide it clear of the other plates, a full arm's length from the diner. Another retreat to gather the effect, and another shift of the plate, this time bringing it into the middle distance, where she allowed it to stand. It was if she maneuvered for the artistic distance, in which the fat slice of apple pie would be most appealing to the appetite of a man after it had been dulled by the charge of cabbage and beef.

"The board's going to put Sallie McCoy back in the school," she said.

"So they told me a little *while* ago."

"Well, I don't care," sighed Viney. Then, hastily: "You know they hired me to take the primary grades in her place."

"No, I hadn't heard."

"I don't care, though. I've got thirteen music pupils and I'd 'a' had to given—gave—them up.

She's a good teacher, but she's awful stuck on herself."

"You don't tell me!"

"Yes, and since Stott turned over that money to 'em yesterday she'll be so stuck-up you can't touch her with a ten-foot pole. You heard about what Stott did—done—didn't you?"

"I just got rumors of it, ma'am."

"Well, *some* people think they're no better than he is, takin' money from him that he stole from somebody else, no matter if it was comin' to them, as some say it was."

"Would you please hand me a glass of water, ma'am?"

Texas made the request with such distant formality, such absolute dismissal of the subject to which she was warming with true scandalous scent, that Viney turned to look back at him as she sped on his request.

When she returned she stood off a little way, dropping her locket down the V-collar of her waist and pulling it up again, as if she sounded the shallows of her bony bosom to find her heart.

"Was there anything else you wished?" she asked.

"Nothing *at* all, thank you kindly, ma'am."

She turned at the door to look at him again.

He was sitting with his head bent in contemplative pose, as if he prayed silently, and the pie stood untouched in the foreground, where Viney had pushed it when she brought the water. Soon from the parlor the tremulous tones of the organ rose. Miss Kelly's voice took up a song.

"I'll be all smiles to-ni-i-i-ght,
I'll be all smiles to-night;
Though my heart should break to-mor-r-ow,
I'll be all smiles to-night!"

Texas left the pie standing as it stood, to serve for another in better trim. Several people had come into the office; Mrs. Goodloe and Malvina were there, all talking excitedly. Miss Kelly's lament was louder than their words; he wondered what new calamity had fallen as he hurried out to join them.

"Oh, ain't it awful!" said Mrs. Goodloe.

"They caught him at Wichita!" Malvina said. "Just to think—"

"Stott, the banker, you know," said a man, recognized by Texas as the railroad station agent by the badge on his hat; "he had two grips full of money."

"The minute they laid hands on him—oh, mercy,

mercy!" Mrs. Goodloe covered her eyes with her hands as she exclaimed.

"Blowed his brains out," said the station agent, turning to Texas, "with his own gun the minute they tapped him on the shoulder and said: 'Come along with us.'"

CHAPTER XXV

AN AMAZING EXODUS

ZEB SMITH was in a bitter frame of mind that afternoon. Out of a job, out of money, wanting a drink, and no credit in the town. The more he thought of the snug nest that Ollie Noggle had nosed him out of, the blacker grew his hate against the long-legged artist of the perfumed hair.

Old Zeb was sitting on a keg in the shade of Jud Springer's combination joint, where he had so lately been a power under the mighty arm of Johnnie Mackey. The smell of sour beer was in the keg, and a score of its mates around him, whetting Zeb's appetite to frenzy. He cursed his bad luck, he cursed Malvina, he cursed the barber and, above all, with a double curse, he blasted Texas Hartwell for his meddlesome interference on the bridal night.

If it hadn't been for that glum-faced stranger, with that thing in his eyes which Smith had come to respect in the very few men who were gifted with it—that thing which was like a cold hand on the back of a man's neck and lead in his heart—if it hadn't been for that solemn, slow-voiced stranger,

look what he'd have come into! A hotel, and a good bed to stretch in, and meals at all hours and money coming in at doors and windows on every wind. It was a shame the way things ran in this world. What fatal prearrangement had fixed their conjunction in Cottonwood at that hour? That was what puzzled Smith and, because it puzzled him, threw him into a deep and dark resentfulness.

There he had come to Cottonwood to hold up Henry Stott at close range, and had found the tent boarding-house that Malvina had started with hardened into a regular hotel, like some kind of a bug that grows a shell in the summer sun. First, this Texas had beaten him out of the hotel, with the insignificant assistance of the despicable barber, and now he had beaten him out of Stott.

Fool enough in his own time, Zeb reflected, he had owned to Hartwell and that little Indian, that he had seen Stott murder McCoy and had been a pensioner of silence ever since. But that little Indian knew it all the time, and knew more, so much more that old Zeb grew cold in a sweat when he considered how much. But the little Indian was dead; he couldn't talk. If Hartwell was out of there also, Zeb believed he could run the barber out of town and take his place again with his feet under Malvina's table.

Zeb hadn't followed events very closely in Cot-

tonwood that day. He had heard that Stott was gone, and the little Indian killed, and somebody else shot up by that Texas man, but all those events were small and uninteresting in comparison with the demand of his clamoring nerves for a drink.

And nobody in town would trust him; not a soul. He had ruined his chances by his overbearing conduct while working as bouncer for Mackey. He hadn't a friend in the world. Worse than that, he hadn't a single article left that he could pledge for a drink, or raise the money on. His gun was gone, his hat was gone, his spurs were gone. A man had to keep the rest of his clothes to meet the requirements of a despised society.

It was torture to smell liquor and not be able to get it, for there was nothing in the beer kegs but the scent. Zeb had tipped them all, licked their chines, rammed his hot tongue into their bungholes in the burning hope of one dribbling drop.

And there was that barber, that snipe-shanked suds mixer, enjoying the kingdom that rightly belonged to him. Noggle never lacked a dime to buy a drink, never knew the torture of the longing for one sizzling slug of whisky to cool his burning guts.

A thought grew out of this bitter denunciation. It swelled in the vaporous brain of alcoholic lees and raised old Zeb Smith to his feet. That barber

had money; people gave the fly-headed scoundrel dimes for shaves, quarters to cut their hair. And what Noggle had, by all the justice that the disinherited claim, belonged to him.

Zeb got up; he headed for the barber shop, a glaze in his eyes, a feeling of dust on his dry lips, his tongue a streak of fire. What belonged to Noggle now had belonged to him originally. No consideration had been rendered for the bed and board which the barber had usurped. This was the day to collect.

Noggle was not in the shop. The door stood open, a newspaper on the chair backed against it, just as if the barber had put it down and fled at the sound of his enemy's footfall. But Noggle was quite unconscious of both Smith's presence and designs. He was across the street in the drug store, smelling over a new stock of perfumes.

Smith went in and sat down, turning his red eyes around the shop, taking stock of what could be snatched and carried off in case the barber did not return speedily and make a settlement in cash. The druggist called Noggle's attention to the waiting customer, and Noggle went out to face the crisis of his life.

Noggle was whistling a little tune when he stepped into the street, and the wind was playing in his scented hair, and turning back the skirts

of his seersucker coat, displaying his pearl-handled gun. He could see the reflection of his own elegance in his shoes. Zeb Smith rose up and filled the door, as forbidding as a lion.

Noggle did not stand to question any phase of the situation at all. He turned and ran, with a cold, gurgling noise in his throat of absolute fright. Smith dashed after him, commanding him in his hoarse, whisky-burned voice to stop and begin a reckoning.

There was but one thought in Noggle's mind, and that was the sanctuary of the hotel. Toward that refuge he sped, cutting the ground in great scissors leaps, old Zeb Smith close after him, his wild hair flying, his wild eyes glaring, his great mustache blowing back to his ears. Away through the business block they went, people giving ground to them, Noggle holding the middle of the sidewalk, that water-gurgle of cold terror still in his throat; after him followed Smith, the one thought of his thoughts being that his last chance must not be allowed to slip his hand.

They passed the city marshal in front of Jud Springer's new joint, but they were going faster than any city marshal in this world ever could hope to move of his own effort, driven by his own physical machinery. He saw the uselessness of pursuit, and let them run unchallenged.

When they arrived at the hotel, Smith was reaching for Noggle's coat-tail. Up-stairs the barber leaped, up-stairs after him Smith lumbered; along the hall toward Malvina's bedroom Noggle ran, shaking the house from shingle to foundation stone, and close behind his heels panted Smith, his eyes as red as hate.

Noggle jumped to the door like a swooping eagle, Smith a rod behind him. Within there was a glimpse of bare shoulders, a shower of unloosed red hair, and the sharp alarm of a woman's scream. Then the door was flung shut in Noggle's face and locked, and the terrible Smith was upon him, his obscene hand gathering a firm hold in the back of the seersucker coat.

Noggle felt a chill of fear crinkle his hair, and leaned and strained and pawed the floor in his struggle to break that hold. It broke, for seersucker is not as strong as fear in the heart of a coward naturally born, and away went Noggle again, on through the hall, down the back stairs, around the hotel, into the main street. He shaped his half-blind course for the door of his shop again, thinking frantically of a razor, beating the ground with his long flat feet until the cow ponies hitched along the way reared back on their halters, and plunged and snorted, raising a dust for a background to

the most tremendous race that Cottonwood ever had seen.

And all the time there hung by the barber's side, under his elbow, near the grasp of his true right hand, his .32 caliber pistol in its patent-leather case.

Three razors lay on the little shelf beneath the mirror in Ollie Noggle's shop, their blades bent backward like the heads of serpents lifted to strike. Smith came up the two steps which raised from the sidewalk to the shop threshold with the back of the seersucker coat still grasped in his defiling hand, at the moment that Noggle, purple, pop-eyed, panting, whirled round and faced him, a command like a cough in his dry throat.

"Don't y'u come in—don't y'u come in!" he panted.

But Smith was already in, and Noggle backed before him to a corner. There, with his thin back to the wall, his own floor beneath his feet, his chair on one hand, his hot water tank on the other, and no possibility of escape through the door, his soul began to enlarge with the desperate determination to fight.

Old Zeb Smith stood before him, red spines of beard on his dirty face, his red flannel shirt open on his hairy chest, crouching from the knees, his hands fixed to spring and tear.

Noggle seized a razor, the hot water of a coward's courage in his eyes, swiped with it, slashed with it, brought it around in bright, confusing whirl in front of Zeb Smith's face. Smith fell back a step, growling in his bearded neck, winking his red eyes as if a hot iron had been thrust under his nose.

"Git out! Git out!" Noggle commanded, his courage bristling on his narrow back like hairs.

"Gimme ten dollars and I'll leave you alone," said Smith.

"No, I won't—no, I won't!" Noggle answered, cheered and strengthened to heroic endeavors by the gathering crowd before his door.

"Gimme—"

Whether Zeb Smith had it in mind to raise his demand, or to lower to a compromise, no man ever heard. For his words broke in horrified, shivering exclamation as Noggle's bright razor darted and slashed and snipped the end of his nose off as if it were a green cucumber.

Smith clapped his hand to the end of his nose in time to catch the fragment as it fell. Terrified beyond expression, he gazed a moment, clamped the bleeding parent stem between finger and thumb and, with the severed portion tightly clasped in the other hand, ran bellowing from the shop.

It wasn't a very big piece that Noggle had cut

from the end of Smith's nose, perhaps not much bigger than a silver quarter, but it must have looked the size of a wagon-wheel to Zeb as he ran with it in his hand to the doctor's office. There he presented it, holding hard to the end of his nose to check the flow of blood, with a thick request that it be immediately attached to its proper surroundings.

The doctor was a short man with a black beard, which was red at times for half an inch next his skin, as business might press, or the coloring matter be slow about reaching him from Kansas City. He was a saw-and-calomel survival of the Civil War, a vituperative man, full of strange and disquieting oaths. He looked on Smith, his bleeding nose, his extended fragment, and cursed him by all the gods in his uncommon vocabulary.

"It's a pity he didn't cut your dam' head off, you old soak! No, I won't sew it on! I won't touch you, you old skunk!"

Smith implored his compassion, still offering the little piece of red nose-end, fiery yet, though drained of blood. The doctor cursed him again, and turned from him. Smith stood looking at the bit of flesh in his hand, breathing through his mouth with a loud noise. "Can't you put it back, doc? My looks'll be ruined!" he said.

With that the swearing doctor turned to him

again, ordered him to sit down, examined the cut.

"It wouldn't take, you old fool!" he said.

Smith insisted that he had heard of such things being done, but the doctor gave him no heed. He set about bandaging the nose, chuckling to himself from time to time behind Smith's back.

"Yes, it might be done," he said, when he had the injured nose wrapped and stuck over with adhesive tape, "but I'm not prepared to do it, Smith. You've got to have human grafting-wax for a job like this, and I'm all out. If you could keep that piece of nose fresh till you go to Kansas City, they could do it for you there."

"Lord, doc, I ain't got the money to go there on!"

"Would you go if I got your ticket, Zeb?"

"I would if I could keep that piece fresh till I get there."

"I'll fix it for you; I'll get a chunk of ice. We'll wrap it up and put it in a box on the ice, and it'll keep as fresh as a fish."

Smith was on hand to take the train for Kansas City, a large dripping box in his hand, a ticket in his pocket for which the money of Ollie Noggle had paid. For the barber realized very well that this was the cheapest and easiest way of ridding himself of Smith for many a day to come. It was one thing for him to go to Kansas City on a pro-

vided ticket, and another for him to come back on one bought by himself.

The doctor was there to watch Zeb aboard, and to caution him in all gravity to get more ice out of the water-cooler in case the chunk in his box should run low. And so Zeb Smith departed from Cottonwood. Whether he ever came back is not a matter that concerns us now. Certainly he was not seen there again in the brief time that remains to the portion of this diminishing tale.

CHAPTER XXVI

JOURNEY'S END

"AND you're a goin' to wear your shoes," said Uncle Boley.

"Yes, sir, I'll save my boots till I get back in the saddle again. I'd only wear 'em out trampin' along over the road in 'em, sir—they're too good for that."

"If I had my way, Texas, you never would leave this country on foot. You'd go on a train or a horse, if I had my say. Oh, well, if I had my *downright* way, you wouldn't leave at all."

"You've been too kind to me already, Uncle Boley, and I haven't done anything in return but show you what a fool feller I am for mussin' and muddlin' things up. I'm through here; if I was to stay on any longer I'd get my foot into it again, somehow, and I'll just bet you a purty I would."

They were in Uncle Boley's shop, and it was late afternoon of the day following Fannie Goodnight's death. They had seen her lowered into her bed in the bare, melancholy cemetery, and Texas was now making ready for the road. The work that time had been saving for him in Cottonwood,

as he often thought, was finished. His listless, and straining, hopes and heart-burnings were at a dead-end in that place. As he came to Cottonwood, like a bird blown far from its native haunts by the storm, so he would leave.

He had gathered nothing but sorrow there, and cares which left their mark in new lines in his solemn, homely face. Perhaps, in the great prearrangement, there had been something else set down to his labors beyond that unfriendly land. A man must go on until he found his place.

His boots were rolled in his blanket, together with his brave black coat. This roll he must carry on his back, for he hadn't money enough left out of the expense of Fannie's burial to buy one leg of a horse.

Hartwell's last word had thrown Uncle Boley into a silent and speculative spell. He sat on his work-bench out of old habit, although dressed in his alpaca coat and derby hat, looking out of his dusty window with fixed stare.

"Yes, that might be so, might be so," he sighed. "Change and doin's seems to be the lot of some folks, peace and easy goin' of others. I've been makin' boots for fifty years and more, and I've made many a pair that men's tromped off in to git rich, or git shot, but I've just kep' right on makin' boots. It wasn't laid out for me to do anything

I reckon; I couldn't 'a' changed it if I'd 'a' ...."

"Maybe not, sir."

"I was aimin' and hopin' to see you settled down here, Texas. There must be something laid out for you besides roamin' and lookin' and never findin'. I wish I could tell you what it is."

"I wish I could tell myself, Uncle Boley, sir."

"I'm put out, and I'm put out worse than I ever was over anything in my life, over the way Sallie's acted up. It ain't like her—she must know them cow-men cleared you, and she ought to be big enough to come in here like a man and tell you she's glad."

"Maybe she isn't a bit glad, sir," said Texas, sadly.

"Yes, she is, dang her little melts! She's holdin' Fannie ag'in you, that's what's eatin' her. Well, if she knew—"

"She mustn't know, sir," Texas interposed, hastily. "Anyhow, not till I'm gone and out of the way."

"I ain't decided she deserves to know at all, Texas. If a woman ain't got faith enough in a man—"

"You can't blame her, sir, *at* all. It looked bad—even you thought I wasn't straight for a little while."

"But I guess it might be good for her to tell her, when you're gone, and let her grieve. Snap judgment ain't fair to a man, and it's harder on a woman, every time. I took it on you that day, but I wasn't so bull-headed I couldn't be reasoned out of it, was I, Texas?"

"You've al-ways been mighty liberal with me, Uncle Boley, even when things looked bad."

"Yes, and I wanted you to like Sallie, tooth and toe-nail, dang the luck! But I'm done with women, I'm through. I ain't a goin' to marry no more; I'm a goin' to take my pen in hand to-night and write to that girl up in Topeky and tell her she don't need to bother about comin' down to look at m' teeth, I'll tell her I lost the last one of 'em I could chaw on this afternoon."

Texas said nothing, although he applauded Uncle Boley's resolution in his heart. For he knew that if Gertie Moorehead ever came to Cottonwood she would marry the old man for his pension. There was the look of a home-hunter in her starved eyes, as hungry as a lost hound's.

"I guess Sallie and her mother won't be needin' me no more, either, since they've got money agin," Uncle Boley said, very sadly.

"Surely, sir, that never can make any difference between them and you. Gratitude for what you've been to them will hold them your friends."

"You can't tell, Texas. Money makes a big difference in people sometimes. Well, sir, there's a good many people here thinks they ought to turn that money over to the bank directors till they can straighten things up. You know, Stott never mentioned that forged note, and nobody else but me and you and Johnnie Mackey knows. Maybe Sallie she'll be fool enough to give it up."

"She mustn't be allowed to, sir, you must tell the people of this town about the forgery, and tell Miss Sallie about it as soon as I'm gone, I expect. Give poor little Fannie the credit for it all, Uncle Boley, and keep my name out of it as much as you can. I was only the instrument, she was the force back of it."

"I'll think it over, Texas, and I'll figger out what to tell her, somehow. I guess your first stop'll be at Colby's ranch?"

"Yes, sir, I'll go there and tell Fannie's relations. Maybe they'll need a hand this fall, and I can work there long enough to buy me a horse. If I can, I'll ride back here and see you before I light out for home—for Taixas—down on the Nueces, sir, where I used to be at."

"I'd give—if I was young and could go with you, Texas—I'd give all the world owes me, or ever owed me. I'd give it all!"

It was almost sundown when Uncle Boley and

Texas paused for their parting on the southern edge of Cottonwood. Uncle Boley had insisted on going with him that far, clinging pathetically to his slipping hold on this friend of his age.

"It'll be dark before you've went very fur, Texas," he said, putting off the last word in the useless way that one will do when parting is inevitable, and the bitterness of tears is rising to the tongue.

"It won't matter, Uncle Boley; I can foller my way."

Texas stood looking off into the south, his head held high, his blanket in a military roll over his shoulder.

"There's not much down there for me but recollections now, but a man loves the place that's been kind to him, and his feet ache to start back to it when his troubles come too fast."

"Maybe you won't like it when you git back there, Texas?" Uncle Boley spoke hopefully, looking up at his young friend's yearning face.

"No man can tell, sir."

"If you don't, you can come back; you can always come back, Texas."

"Sir, thank you kindly. And I'll be rackin' on."

Texas unbuckled the revolver that Uncle Boley had given him and handed it back to the old man.

"What're you aimin' to do, Texas?" Uncle Boley inquired in surprise.

"I've worn it, sir, to the last minute, hatin' to give it up, but this is our partin'-line, Uncle Boley, and I'm puttin' it back in your hands. You gave it to me, and I'm restorin' it through you to Miss Sallie. Give it to her, sir, and tell her the man that wore it last went away with a doubt in his heart of his worthiness. She never come to say a word!"

Uncle Boley took the pistol without protest, for there was not the strength of protest in his crushed old heart. He could see Texas in wavering outline through his tears, and Texas was still looking away into the south like one watching the receding shores of country and home.

"I'm going away from you-all, Uncle Boley, sir," he said, "but I'm leavin' my heart staked out here behind me. It'll pull back on me like a rock."

He turned to the old man in a moment, his face illumined by his transforming smile.

"Good-by, Uncle Boley, and good luck to you, sir, wherever you may be."

Uncle Boley's farewell choked in his throat. He clung to Hartwell's hand and went trailing beside him, toddling like a child, heartbroken to see him go. Texas patted his hand as if giving him assurance and benediction, gently broke his clasp, and hurried down the slope.

The old man stood looking after him until he mounted the knoll beyond, and passed over the top out of sight. Then he returned to the spot where he had dropped the revolver, and sat down, his forehead bowed upon his knees, and wept.

There came the sound of a horse slowly ridden through the grass, its quickening pace, its sudden stopping close behind his back. Uncle Boley resented this trespass upon his grief, for he was far from any traversed road, out on the unfenced, unmown prairie lands. He did not lift his head.

Somebody came running to his side; he could hear the short breath of excitement.

"Why, Uncle Boley! What's the matter—are you hurt?"

"Yes, Sallie, I'm hurt; I'm hurt bad!"

She was on her knees beside him, stroking his hand, looking into his face with fright in her sorrowful brown eyes, anxiety in her sympathetic voice.

"Who did it?" she whispered, the sight of the revolver, which she knew too well, bringing a rush of horrible, strangling suspicion.

"You done it!" said Uncle Boley, bitterly. He disengaged her hand, pushed her away, got to his feet.

"I did it? Why, Uncle Boley, I wouldn't—"

"I was a friend to you, and I stood by you—here,

take this gun and go on home, before I say something to you that don't become me!"

Sallie stood looking at him, her face bloodless, making no effort to take the proffered weapon.

"The man that wore it last left it here a little while ago and walked away over that hill, and left my old age as barren as the top of a rock. I've lived nearly eighty year, and I've got to meet the man that's equal to him in honor and kindness of heart—but he's gone. He said for me to hand this gun back to you. Here—take it, and go on home!"

She reached out for it, but her eyes were not with her hand. She was looking away into the south, with something of the same yearning in her face as the old man had seen in Hartwell's but a little while before.

"Isn't he coming back any more, Uncle Boley?" she asked, her voice very small, a tremor in it, no pride in her quick young heart.

"What's he got to come back for? His work's done."

She dropped the heavy pistol and belt at her feet, and a little flush of color came into her face.

"I suppose his world is empty now," she said.

"Well, yours ain't," said Uncle Boley, rather sharply. "You've got your sixty thousand dollars, but you wouldn't 'a' had sixty cents if it hadn't been for that poor girl we put away under the sod to-day.

Yes, you can look up, and jump, and turn white. You ain't worthy to drop a clod as big as the end of your finger on her coffin, Miss Sallie McCoy!"

"Oh, Uncle Boley, what do you mean?" she appealed.

"This has been a day of partin' and goin's away," said Uncle Boley heavily. "I'll set down, Sallie, and I'll tell you something you've got to know for the good of your soul."

She dropped to the grass beside him, afraid of his portentous manner, shocked by the seeming brutality of his words. Uncle Boley sat a little while looking in the direction that Hartwell had gone, and by and by he took off his hat and laid it on the grass at his side.

"Well, he's gone now; I'll not be breakin' my word to him if I tell you, Sallie. I guess it's only right for you to know, no matter if it does take the hide off somewhere."

So Uncle Boley told her the story of Fannie Goodnight, and how she came into Texas Hartwell's life, and what she had been to him. And when he came to that part of it Sallie covered her face with her hands and burst out crying, sobbing and moaning as if the grave had opened at her feet and swallowed the best that the world contained for her.

"I knew he didn't care for her—I knew he was

honest—and I was ashamed to go back and tell him!"

"Just a fool fit of jealousy, and look what you done."

"He's gone away thinkin' I'm ungrateful, and a mean, proud, foolish thing!"

"Maybe not. He was too good and square to think hard of other folks, especially when he—where've you been trapesin' around to, Sallie?"

"I went down to Duncan's night before last, Uncle Boley. I'm going home."

"Oh, you did? Had to go down and let 'em know you're rich agin, did you?"

"I went to take him the word that Stott sent us before he ran away with the bank's money, Uncle Boley."

"Did that dish-faced Dutch houn' send word to you that Texas wasn't to blame for them fever cattle, Sallie?"

"Yes, Uncle Boley," she replied softly, her face turned away still, the flush deeper over her cheeks and neck.

"And you took your horse in the night and went tearin' off to Duncan's alone to tell him?"

"It wasn't anything to what she—the other one—did for him," she said, her words almost a whisper, her eyes cast down.

"No," Uncle Boley admitted, with ungenerous

readiness, it seemed, "it wasn't. But every little helps, Sallie; every little helps. It shows your heart wasn't half as foolish as your tongue."

She put her arm around the old man's neck and suddenly hid her face on his shoulder, crying again as if there was nothing left between the seas to console her.

"I loved him so, Uncle Boley! Oh, I loved him so!"

Uncle Boley stroked her hair, the light back in his kind blue eyes. He felt her body shake with the grief that hurt her soul.

"Well, I don't know what we can do about it now, Sallie," he said. But a smile moved his beard as he looked southward and saw a figure rise a little hill, and stand a moment as if already the backward strain of his heart was making his road harder than he could bear.

A little while; Sallie sat up again. She laid her hand tenderly on the stock of the pistol that Texas had left behind.

"I wish he had his gun, Uncle Boley."

"I reckon he does too, Sallie. But he felt he didn't have no right to it without a word from you."

"Did he—did he—buy a new one, Uncle Boley?"

"No, he never, Sallie. Just took it off down here and handed it to me and went on his way without no more gun on him than a rabbit."

"I wish he had it," said she, looking anxiously over the prairie.

She stood on her knees, looking still; but Texas had passed over the knoll and out of sight. Uncle Boley smiled. There was another knoll beyond, and another, and onward to the horizon, like the swells of a peaceful sea.

"I wish he had it," she said again, slowly, her voice very sad and low, as if she whispered her wish after him to find him on his lonely way.

"Well, if I was as young as I was sixty years ago I'd hop a horse and take it to him. But I ain't; I ain't been on a horse no tellin' when."

Sallie was standing, looking away into the hazy south, straining forward a little, her lips open, her breath coming fast.

"How long has he been gone, Uncle Boley?"

"Oh, fifteen or twenty minutes."

"He can't be very far away yet."

"No, I don't reckon he's so fur a horse couldn't ketch him."

"Why, I believe—I do—I *do* see him!"

"Sure enough!" said Uncle Boley, feigning great surprise. "Well, darn that feller's slow shanks! he ain't went more'n a mile."

"Do you suppose he'd think—if I went, do you suppose—"

"No tellin'," Uncle Boley replied gravely, his

blue eyes growing brighter, his old beard twitching as if a wind moved in it about his lips.

Sallie was straining as if she projected her soul into the south after the lone traveler who stood dark-lined against the sky. She held her hands out as if she called him; the cool wind of sunset was in her light-moving hair.

"Would you come back, Texas, if I'd go to you and tell you I'm sorry and unworthy, but lonesome —oh, so lonesome! Would you come back— home?"

She seemed unconscious of Uncle Boley's presence, calling her appeal after that dark figure no bigger in the distance than a finger held against the sky. The old man took the revolver from the ground, threw the belt over the pommel of her saddle, and came leading the horse forward. Uncle Boley made a gesture with his hand as if sweeping her away. She leaped into the saddle and galloped swiftly to her heart's desire.

The old man stood looking after her as the south drew her on, smaller with the rising of each successive swell.

"Her heart's a flyin' to him like a dove," he said. "Well, do you reckon he'll come back?"

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